

The Absurd Self and The Naked City: An Existential Redefinition of Sustainable Urbanism and the Case of Banaras

MAHESH SENEGALA

Gould Evans Goodman Associates, Kansas City, MO

It's absurd means "It's impossible" but also "It's contradictory." If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view.¹

— Albert Camus

PROLOGUE

This essay stems from the proposition that the problems of the world stem fundamentally from the (existential) problems of the self and the problems of the societal institutions. Contrary to the conventional belief that sustainability is a physical-environmental issue in our societies, I propose that — through a significant redefinition of the idea — sustainability is a central existential problem that affects everything between the self and the city.

I will consider here an existential approach to sustainable urbanism that is inclusive and holistic. The 5000 year old Indian city of Banaras will serve as a case to illustrate this discourse about urbanism and sustainability.

THREE LEVELS OF SUSTAINABILITY: A HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK

Sustainability is not merely an environmental problem that resides "out there." Sustainability is not just a "green" problem, but also a problem of the existential "blues." Fundamentally, an intrinsic and existential problem is projected onto the physical environment. I propose a re-framing of the sustainability agenda today through what I call "Three Levels of Sustainability":

- **Spiritual and Individual Sustainability:** Sustainability of the spirit. I use the word spiritual as an umbrella concept to encompass *existential, psychological, metaphysical, epistemological* and other highly ethereal, yet very real aspects of human existence. These issues are timeless and intrinsic to being human. If a product or a project does not meet this level of sustainability, it is fundamentally unsustainable. (Will we remember it after a thousand years? Would a Louis Kahn be proud of it?)
- **Institutional and Cultural Sustainability:** The realms of political, economic, linguistic, organizational, sociological and cultural issues are a concern at this level. (Is it truly democratic? Does it allow people to live freely and creatively?)
- **Physical and environmental sustainability:** The problems of natural resources, life cycles, energy efficiency, renewable energy, environmental pollution, etc. come under this category. Even if a project meets this level of sustainability, it would still be unsustainable unless it meets the first two levels of



Fig. 1.

sustainability. (Is it mother earth-friendly? Is it ecologically sound?)

The majority of today's work on sustainability and city deals only with the third kind of sustainability, physical sustainability. As Erich Fromm told us, "even the most complete satisfaction of all his instinctive needs does not solve his human problem; his most intensive passions and needs are not those rooted in the body, but those rooted in the very peculiarity of his existence."² Unless the level of spiritual sustainability is attained, the other two levels make little or no sense. Environmentalism that focuses on material transformation is a mutiny within the prison — not a liberation from the prison.

THE BAG OF NEEDLES: THE NECESSITY FOR AN EXISTENTIAL DISCOURSE OF SUSTAINABILITY

The environment is almost alright; it is the human condition and institutions that are not alright. The problems of the world, including the environmental threats, in essence, stem from the problems of the self — both the individual and the collective self. To focus on the environmental issues without first addressing the human existential and institutional issues is a blunder.

We, the human beings are like bags of needles. Whatever we touch hurts. We then blame what we touch as the source of that pain. We forget conveniently that the needles are within us that prick us every moment.

As some wise soul said, "we will kill ourselves before we run out of fossil fuels"! If we look around, the world is a gigantic mess with wars, insecurities, genocides, fascist and undemocratic regimes, ruthless executions, famine, and so on. In Uganda, the rebels have brutally hatcheted and hacked touring foreigners to death. In Africa

the Hootus have massacred millions of the Tootsies. In Cambodia, millions of people were systematically decimated by Pol Pot. Hitlarian holocaust is a well-known history. In the US, firearms and road rages kill more people than all the Americans that have died in all of their wars combined. In India, the Hindu extremists have recently burned alive many Christian missionary families over the fear of conversion. In the US, pro-life extremists have been systematically assassinating abortion doctors in the name of saving lives. Last year alone there were five violent shootings in the US schools involving disgruntled and alienated kids who don't know how to spell "environment." These are only the more violent expressions of lesser forms of existential conflicts that plague all of us without exception. Millions of people die not because of the environmental problems, but because of the mental and institutional problems. This list is a tip of the iceberg of the human crises, wars, massacres and genocides that have been occurring since prehistory. If we talk about human sustainability in this context, then we would see it in a strikingly different perspective. If we place such a tormented species on any planet, that planet would turn into ashes. Where is this rage and inherent brutality of human insecurity springing from? What are we sustaining and why? Assuming that we ever resolve the environmental issues, will the world ever be a happy family? It would be unwise to think so.

Mother Earth will persist with or without us — the aberrant species. If we decimate all life forms on the earth, it may grow back in time . . . in a billion years, or maybe after a couple of big bangs. Surely the trillion gazillion light-year-wide universe doesn't care what goes on here on this speck of dust called the earth. For all we know, there maybe a million earths out there. We have to stop kidding ourselves saying that the problem is out there: The first thing we have to save is the human soul -not the universe or the planet or a tree or a bug. The human being is the most endangered species in the universe. To me what is more important is to focus on the human existential issues of sustainability than the environmental issues. Unless we find out ways to reconcile the deeply ruptured human condition, there is no question of achieving sustainability.

Erich Fromm, one of the most brilliant commentators on the human condition writes about the fundamental schism in the human heart:

Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the 'harmony' which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part . . . Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. He visualizes his own end: death. Never is he free from the dichotomy of his existence . . .³

Further, he says:

This split in man's nature leads to dichotomies, which I call existential because they are rooted in the very existence of man; they are contradictions, which man cannot annul but to which he can react in various ways, relative to his character and his culture.⁴

Fromm's comments effectively sum up what we wake up to every morning and what we sleep with every night, and everything that happens in between.

Physical sustainability initiatives strive to alter the physical or socio-political environment to reestablish an ecological equilibrium without reestablishing the equilibrium of existential ecology. Albert Camus muses:

Whether the earth or sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a

reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.⁵

As long as there is an existential irresolution, humankind is going to be fundamentally unsustainable. Thus, sustainability is primarily an existential problem.

ABSURDITY, ALIENATION AND THE MODERN SELF

As Nietzsche pronounced, God is dead. But death becomes alive and life for the modern human ends with death. All that a person builds his or her entire life comes to an abrupt end and that is irresolvably meaningless. From this condition arises our uncaring attitude toward our future generations as we cannot any longer view our life as a continuum that extends beyond our physical existence.

Modern human being's actions are directed toward incessantly amassing knowledge, memories, actions, wealth and fame that, they hope, would validate the meaning of existence. Like Kafka's Joseph K., every second of our life is consumed by our necessity to justify and prove our existence. We feel that we are guilty of living until proven otherwise. Everyone of us is familiar with that feeling of guilt when we do nothing on a certain day and feel that we have committed a cardinal sin. *Time has become such a precious, unsustainable and rare commodity in the modern societies precisely because we do not have enough time to complete our life work and discover the meaning of our life. Speed, a consequence of absurd time is one of the primary determinants and destroyers of our cities today.*

This absurdity and the sense of alienation are reflected in the epistemology and existence of present-day architecture and urbanism. What is easy to part with? That which you love or that which you do not care about? Obviously, it is the latter. It is easier to part with architecture and infrastructure that does not mean much to us. So, we produce architecture-of strip malls, kitschy commercial buildings, ugly warehouses, etc.-that no body can relate to or cares about. We have cities that no body cares about. We have a world that no body cares much. The world that nobody cares about is simply unsustainable. We live in a world that 'doesn't matter' where sustainability becomes a difficult proposition. Our cities are built today for strangers by strangers. We are all "strangers" in our cities of alienation. In our cities, everyone is "comfortable" but nobody is at "home." *We don't "live" in our cities anymore; we "use" them.* Thus, we are going through a civilizational neurosis, of which our chaotic cities and meaningless architecture are toxic by-products.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRISIS OF THE SELF AND ARCHITECTURE

Elucidating these issues from another angle, Jean-François Lyotard, in his seminal post-structural epistemological work *The Postmodern Condition*, traces the schism of human institutions in the changing nature of knowledge in industrial and postindustrial societies.

Lyotard observes that traditional cultures were characterized by the cultural cohesion brought about by, what he calls, *narrative knowledge*. Mythologies, folklore, legends, stories and tales constitute the body of narrative knowledge. In those pre-scientific cultures, mythologies and other narratives that explained the purpose and destiny of life formed the outermost layer that lies beyond the notions of proof and evidence. Every other kind of knowledge remained within the purview of those *metanarratives*. The narratives provided the metaphors and meaning necessary for living. Such knowledge was both concretized and reinforced through architecture and urbanism of those times.

Lyotard argues that the spell of metanarratives broke down with the advent of industrial revolution. Scientific knowledge has become a distinct body of knowledge in itself and begun challenging

narrative forms of knowledge in its zeal to *explain* (as opposed to *experience*) the life and the universe. Lyotard writes that "In the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity." Further, he says, "I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure."⁶

The crux of his argument is that scientific knowledge, which is based on *evidence, proof, and legalities* deals only with the verifiable workings and facts of the universe such as *efficiency, function and optimization*. Scientific forms of knowledge do not deal with such issues as *justice, morality, compassion, beauty, love, meaning* and a myriad other non-material and intangible human attributes. As Lyotard rightly points out, both kinds of knowledge are equally necessary for us to live, but the problem begins when scientific or technological knowledge begins to enter the game of rejecting narrative knowledge in an effort to legitimize itself as the only valid form of knowledge. We live at a time of delegitimation of narrative forms of knowledge. Where there is no narrative, there is no ideology. Where there is no ideology, there is no possibility of achieving a meaningful world.

A LIFE-LESS WORLD:

An epistemology based on narrative forms of knowledge is crucial to the sustenance of the societal sanity and a sustainable worldview. As Claude Levi-Strauss and Joseph Campbell have eloquently pointed out in various works, mythologies play a significant role in forging a meaningful worldview. In such a narrative-less environment, things become a set of disparate, inanimate and lifeless commodities. Rivers become "resources" that "supply" us water and "carry" the industrial waste. Streets become roads that "expand" to accommodate "growing traffic." The Sun becomes an "energy source" that gives us "daylight" and "solar energy." Our worldview has become utilitarian, prosaic, performative, barren and alienating. For us, the universe is dead matter. Therefore, from this limited view of life, we think that we are alone in the universe and keep wondering if there is any 'life' out there. Likewise, we have come to see our cities as a dead and lifeless bunch of functional objects in the absence of philosophical, poetic and existential narratives. It is tough, if not impossible, to "respect" and "care" for something that we cannot relate to as a living being or as an integral part of our psychological existence.

The most important development that Lyotard points out pertains to the loss of meaning in the postmodern world: "Lamenting the loss of meaning in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative."⁷ Scientific knowledge is incapable of addressing the existential dilemmas. As an extension, architectural and urban development initiatives predicated *centrally* on scientific, performative, functional and infrastructural criteria are also incapable of addressing our existential agonies.

HOMO INFRASTRUCTURALE: THE RISE OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE SOCIETY AND THE FALL OF URBANISM

Sing a song
or
Laugh
or
Cry
or
Go away.
— "Please" by Nanao Sasaki⁸

We do not make cities anymore. The capitalistic appropriation of the modernist functional metaphysic has led to a degenerative undercurrent that swept away and eroded the existential substance and potential of architecture. Urbanism has been replaced by infrastructure.⁹ The schism between scientific and narrative forms of knowledge and the resultant delegitimation of narrative knowledge has also led to a subversion and *infrastructuralization* of urbanism. The rise of scientific knowledge as a legitimizing knowledge fostered an epistemological environment of *functional values* and *performatory goals*. As Lyotard says, machines and infrastructure "follow a principle, and it is the principle of optimal performance: maximizing output (the information or modifications obtained) and minimizing input (the energy expended in the process). Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical 'move' is 'good' when it does better and/or expends less energy than another."¹⁰ *Therein lies the crisis of the sustainability of architecture and the city.*

The city stands in a different relationship to us. The city is what we dwell in. We expand the envelopes of our body and psyche through architecture. Architecture has this crucial psychological responsibility. The city may contain infrastructure but architecture is in itself not reducible to infrastructure. We need to transform infrastructure into the city and not the other way around.

The perceptual and relational poverty of *homo infrastructurale* was brilliantly captured by Jean-Paul Sartre. In *La Nausée*, Sartre's hero Antoine Roquentin muses:

Objects ought not to move one, since they are not alive. They should be used and put back in their place; one lives among them, they are useful and that is all. But I am moved by them, it is unbearable. I am as frightened of coming in contact with them as if they were live beasts.¹¹

Sustainable urbanism is urbanism with greater responsibility without losing sight of its fundamental responsibilities. The complex nature of urbanism comes out when we think analogically: Why do we never talk of sustainable music or sustainable art or sustainable films? There is music that has sustained itself for centuries and there is also art that has sustained itself over millennia. There is literature that we hold sacred from generation to generation. There are films that would live with us as long as we do. *Such sustainability is achieved not because they are about the environment or ecology, but because they are about the human condition.* They are about the complexities, paradoxes and vagaries of human existence. The city becomes meaningful and sustainable when it speaks to us as does a *Casa Blanca* or a *Rashomon* or a *Schindler's List*. The city sustains itself when it becomes as sublime and powerful as Beethoven's *5th Symphony* or Gershwin's *Summertime*. Music that does not move us is not music. The city that does not move us is not a city. The kind of built environment that we often have today is more barren, boring, uninspiring, banal, meaningless, unpoetic and unadventurous than a documentary on "how to raise pigs." How could we expect such infrastructure to become sustainable? Our cities would become sustainable when they are a part of our journey to understand and ennoble ourselves. Our cities should once again "Sing a song/ or/ Laugh/ or/ Cry" or they will become infrastructure and "go away."

URBANISM (OR LACK THEREOF) IN THE AGE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Once upon a time, cities used to be a source of poetry. Think of Athens, Rome, Paris of yesteryears and you are reminded of great architecture, art, literature and philosophy. The city of today is reduced to infrastructure, just as architecture today is degraded to infrastructure. The veils of mythology and religion were lifted with the advent of scientific mode of thought. Modern urban planning and design processes have become functional, prosaic, (pseudo) scientific and barren. With the breakdown of narrative knowledge, as

Lyotard pointed out, meaning has become an impossible ideal.

The city is the primary domain of human existential or essential pursuits. Analogous to our existential boundlessness and absurdity, the cities grew boundless and absurd. Naked, we face each other and our cities in all our absurdity, unable to form any profound and long lasting relationships. We are amorphous. Unlike our ancestors who had the luxury of societal forms, veils, masks, charades, mythologies and a range of narrative structures to give them a form and substance, we are amorphous and left to ourselves. We try to cover our naked self and give a form to our amorphous self through myriad actions. The city, the formless and naked city is an echo of our condition.

Yet, we still dream of the cities that have a form and substance without realizing that it is an impossible task to accomplish in the absence of existential stability and collective narratives such as literature and mythologies that could help establish connections, values, ethics and relationships between things and self. Our cities have only one logic: they respond to our functional demands-inexorable functional demands. We have lost our prerogative and capacity to dwell poetically.

THE CITY OF BANARAS: A CITY TO DIE FOR

Now, let us go on a pilgrimage to a sustainable city that is all about *existence* and *sustenance*. If we turn our clocks back by 5,000 years, we will see, on the west bank of river Ganges in North India, a place with three hillocks that is the seed of a very special human phenomenon, the city of Banaras. The city not only survived, but thrived over the last 5,000 years and is still very much alive. During five millennia, the city has sustained its essence, character, mythological power and existential agenda.

To put it simply, people go to Banaras to die-die happily, I might add. That is a truly startling concept. We go to Las Vegas to escape the boring and banal reality of other cities and immerse ourselves in a hedonistic hyper-reality. We go to Paris to immortalize our moments of love. However, there is no other place on earth like Banaras, a city where you go with an express purpose of spending the last days of your life. Think of it as an *existential airport* to life after death. In Banaras, death is not a dead-end; rather, it is a passage, a transition and a gateway. That is the *raison de etre* of Banaras. Why would anybody think up such a city like that? What means and modalities allow Banaras to attain such heights of existential resolution?

I must disclaim here that I do not hold Banaras as a representative of the cities of past, and I am not making an historical argument. Banaras is a unique and original phenomenon that has no precedent or antecedent.

Banaras is at a rare confluence of unique geography, unique mythology, unique urban form and unique cultural institutions. Banaras is located about 500 miles south of New Delhi, India. Here, the river Ganges changes her usual direction of south-east and flows back in a northerly direction as if to point at her origins in the Himalayas, the sacred mountains for Hindus. The river also takes a crescent profile as if to reconfirm the mythology that Lord Shiva-the presiding deity of the city-wears the moon on his head. The landscape on west bank rises into three hillocks and becomes the trident of *Lord Shiva*. The "other bank" of river Ganges is, in contrast, flat and plain.

In plan, the city is a half circle. While the west bank of the Ganges has been inhabited for thousands of years, the east bank of the river has NEVER been touched. While the west bank of the city grew into a complex and congested city, the "other bank" was left totally undeveloped. The reasons have nothing to do with the city code. The other bank, for the people of Banaras, stands for the "other world" or heaven. The other half of the semi-circular city resides in the other world and people go there after they die. They metaphorically cross the existential river of life to reach the eternal city of the *other* Banaras.

Banaras is a city of circuits. In this city, devoted pilgrims

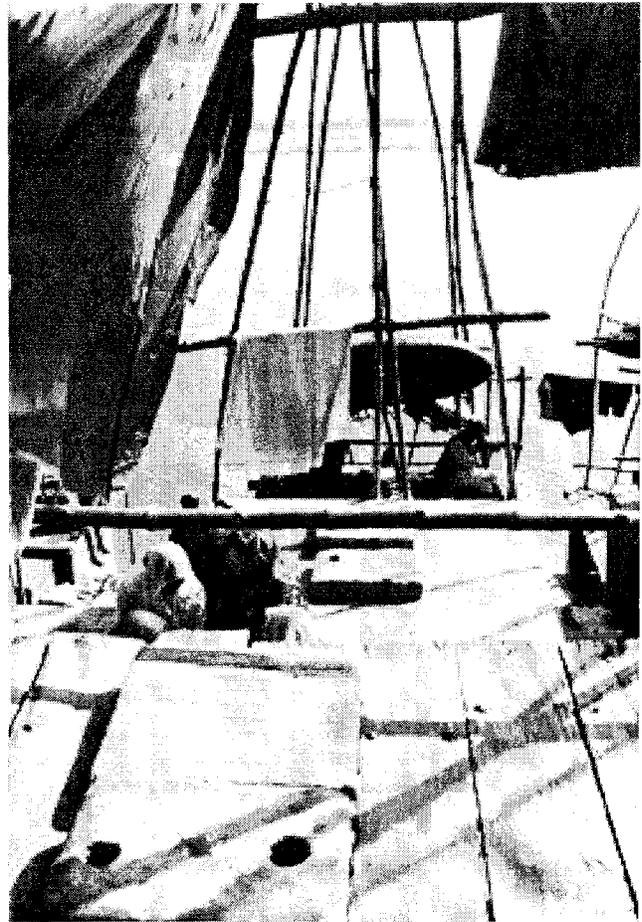


Fig. 2.

carrying food, faith and age-old stories, circle the city by following the sixteen codified sacred circuits. The city is like an onion: circuits within circuits, one finally reaches the center where the great temple of Lord Shiva resides. The form of the city is made, remade and reasserted as people trace the circuits in the footsteps of their elders.

The city is defined by neither the fort walls nor the boundaries, but by the *circuits of sacred circumambulation*. These circuits around the city and its countless temples form not a map but a mandala in the minds of devoted pilgrims as they traverse the routes, chanting and reciting the myths and stories about the places they come across. In this way the pilgrims meditate the city and establish a correspondence between the city of the mind and the city of the material world. Ultimately, it is the city of the mind that the people carry with them and possess-not the material city.

There is a distinction between the "map reading image" of the city and the "myth reading image of the city." *The mandala of Banaras is a kinesthetic and mytho-poetic image of the city that one forms by experiencing it through traversing it ritually in space.* You may find your way by means of a map, but with a *mandala*, you become the mandala. A *mandala* is no map; it is a constellation of myths, legends, imagery and sensory experiences. In the chanting of stories and traversing the city by foot, the city is constantly conserved, imagined, created and revised. Somewhere in the process of traversing the city, one existentially transforms one's own self into the city and the city is projected as an image of one's self.

The city meets its river through a vivacious interface called ghats. At the ghats¹², the momentum and the energy of the city of Banaras is thwarted such that it forces the city edge into a rugged, fat, haphazard, incoherent, circumstantial mass of walls, facades, spires, towers, palaces and platforms. The intersection of the city of steps

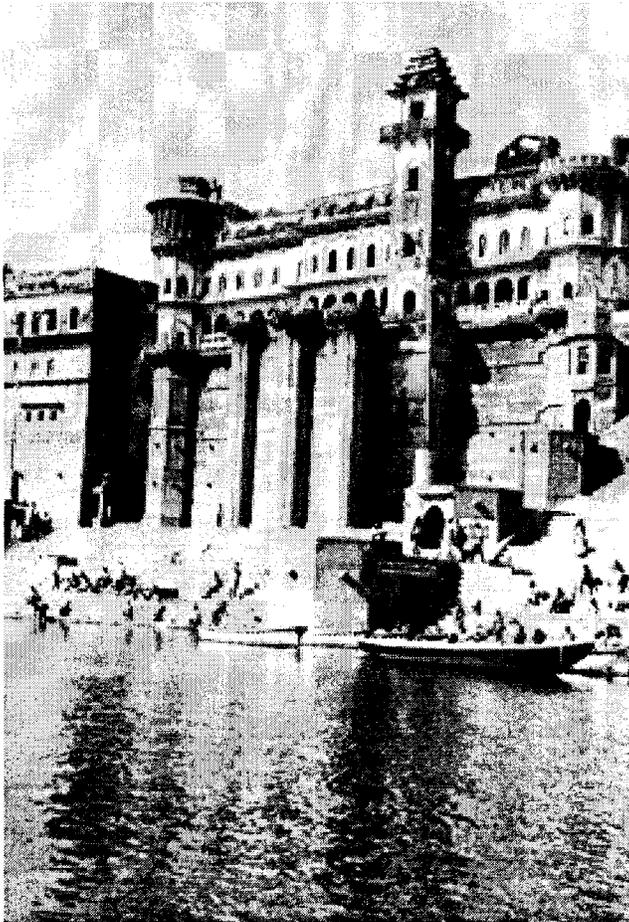


Fig. 3.

and the labyrinthine Banaras is intense indeed.

If you are a pilgrim, you may take a walk from *Asi Ghat* along the uneven terrain of the river edge. What you come across may be the most profound and surreal, yet meaningful experience of the city and its life. Along the length of the ghats unfolds the breadth of Banarasi life:

A wrecked boat can be seen capsized in the silt of the muddy clay bank. A half-naked mendicant stands waist-deep in the water, in the company of a herd of imperturbable cows, water buffaloes, a series of dilapidated umbrellas, Peepal leaves, Marigolds, Roses, Lotus that adore the ghats. Well-versed Brahmins conduct funeral oblations for bereft families. A forest of lamp-holding bamboo sticks, a leaning temple capsized in the soft clay, a bangle man, a rusty balustrade, a worn off rope that once held the mightiest of the boats and an abandoned tower house compete for the same place at the river's edge and the viewer's mind.

You may also, if you are patiently and curiously walking along the ghats, meet the vandalized stone plinths of the lofty palaces, a scale measuring the height of the Ganges when she floods in ecstasy, a blood-clad *Hanuman*,¹³ a rusted bicycle, a group of mischievous kids flying kites, stray dogs and *Gandharvas*.¹⁴ Burning corpses with swirling smoke blacken the empty edifices. Still hot ashes of a funeral pyre and a meditating yogi with a trident and saffron flag, chatting fishermen with tangled nets, graceful young girls and the floating bodies of dead infants coexist simultaneously on the craggy steps of the ghats. You wonder what brings all of these disparate things and phenomena together. While as a stranger you maybe baffled by the onslaught of images, things and events, the people of Banaras seem completely to be at home with the city. You wonder what gives them a power to reconcile their existential dilemmas with

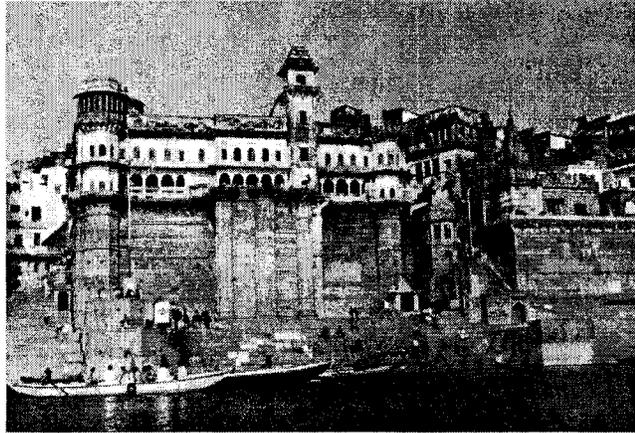


Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

this labyrinthine city. You soon realize that, as in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, there is more to Banaras than meets the eye.

There the people, in an effort to experience the fullness and completeness of the world, have created certain beautiful fictions portrayed in an all entralling mythology called *Kashi Purana*¹⁵: Such delightful myths as Parvathi's ear rings¹⁶, Divodasa's ten-horse sacrifice¹⁷, a broken bow and a bride won, Indra with a diamond edged lethal weapon,¹⁸ etc., situate the physical city amid a narrative and fictional city. The invisible and mythical population of Banaras far surpasses the visible population and dominates the visible world.

At Banaras, everything — by which I mean *everything* — has a

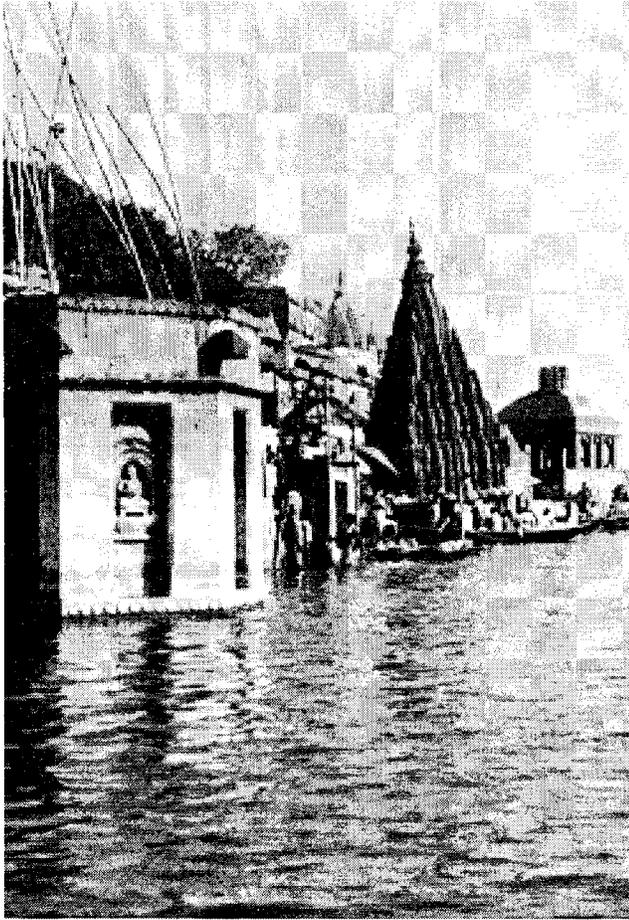


Fig. 6.

story, a legend or a myth. Like the morning mist, Banaras is enveloped by mythologies — powerful mythologies. *Story telling is one recurrent way of structuring and sustaining Banaras. The sacred fiction sustains the city and its pursuits. Mythology is the form giver of the city.* Here, form undoubtedly follows fiction — immaculate fiction. There is the larger context of Gods, heavens, nether worlds, demons, Gandharvas, sages, ascetics and epics of the mythical India; and there is the fiction of the city of Banaras that fits into the larger work of sacred literature. The secret of Banaras' integrity is neither in its magnificent spires nor in its vivacious ghats; the secret of Kashi is neither in its topography nor in its traditional structures alone. The real secret of Banaras is wide open: it is the way everything is interwoven into a huge system of sacred fiction.

People come here to die. And behold, they are only too happy to die!! It is said that even a dog can be blessed with liberation if it dies within the bounds of *Panch Krosi* — the largest circumambulatory circuit that defines the city limits. Even if one has led a miserable life, death in Banaras is said to liberate one of all the agony. The invisible signs on thousands of temples, ghats and houses in Banaras tacitly declare this eternal bargain through an ingenious epistemology of space. At *Manikarnika* ghat you could see scores of people young and old, of all castes and sexes unafraid of death! At Banaras, death, the biggest human fear and enigma, has been tamed and domesticated by the city and its mythologies. With death, all of your sins are forgiven by virtue of your being in the city of Banaras. Existence is eternal and immortal, and therefore sustainable in Banaras.

People in Banaras learn story-telling right from the time their mothers sang lullabies about *Lord Rama* under the moonlit sky; the time they played in the streets, shrines and the steps of the ghats and contemplated the mysterious emptiness of the other bank. When

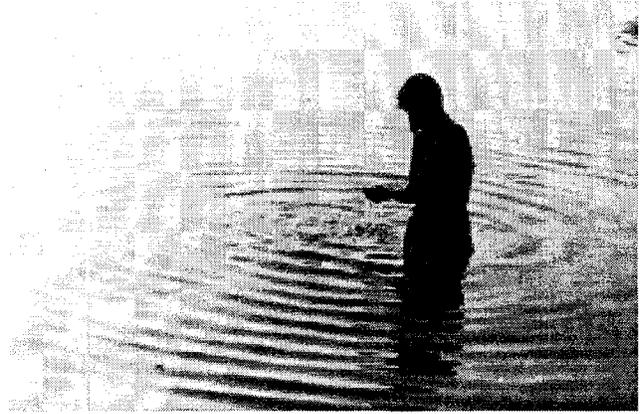


Fig. 7.

they grow up, they see the whole world as a beautiful work of fiction: a work where everything is well composed and is under the control of the author. The author is at the center and there are a million authors inhabiting Banaras, visiting it and imagining it. It is all imagination and it is powerful and enthralling. For the people of Banaras, the whole universe is replete with life. For the people of Banaras, there is nothing is inanimate or lifeless in the universe. The post-structuralist observation about the *death of the author* serves as an excellent comparison between the cities of infrastructure and the city of Banaras. Albeit with a different inclination and intent, Camus made a brilliant observation that reinforces the notion of humanizing the universe: "If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled."¹⁹

In the rugged undulation of the masculine land forms, the people of Banaras see the trident of *Lord Shiva* or *Mount Meru*. In the feminine curves of the sweeping crescent — the Ganges — they see a caring mother. In the sky crowded with lazy clouds is a theater where, perhaps, a demon drinks *Sura, the eternal drink*, in the shadow of a mountain. The emptiness of the other bank is an unfolded blankness posed against the crammed tightness of the stony complexity of this bank. *Place making is myth making: place makes myth, myth makes place. What distinguishes Banaras from other cities is that there the existential dilemmas are duly recognized and addressed.*

Thus, in Banaras, we see a valuable, unique and grand urban paradigm to reconcile our existential dilemmas through a marriage of architecture, urbanism and narrative means of dwelling. We learn from Banaras that fiction is a powerful mode of imagining, building and dwelling our cities. We also learn that mythologies and other fictions are essential to enliven the inanimate world of things and infrastructure. The existential absurdity of life and death are reconciled through the architecture of the city of Banaras. As we have discussed, when such a reconciliation takes place spatially, our cities and architecture become sustainable.

EPILOGUE

I hope that this essay opens new avenues and modalities to approach architecture and urban design in the age of infrastructure. Once we are able to reconcile the absurdity of life, once we are able to robe the unbearable nakedness of our cities, we might begin to re-discover our sanity and humanity, because only a sane society is a sustainable society. I hope that architecture and cities will once again "sing a song/ or/ cry/ or/ laugh" so that they do not "go away."

NOTES

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 11.

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- ² Erich Fromm, *Sane Society* (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1967)
- ³ Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (Greenwich, CN, Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1966), pp. 48-49.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Op. Cit., pp. 1-2.
- ⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 7.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ⁸ Nanao Sasaki, *Break the Mirror* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p. 47.
- ⁹ Webster dictionary defines infrastructure as "the underlying foundation or basic framework."
- ¹⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, Op. Cit., p 44.
- ¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, as quoted by Gabriel Marcel in *The Philosophy of Existentialism* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), p. 50.
- ¹² A *ghat* is a stepped interface between a river and land.
- ¹³ *Hanuman* is a Hindu mythological God with the characteristics of a monkey.
- ¹⁴ *Gandharvas* are the heavenly musicians in Hindu mythology.
- ¹⁵ *Kashi Purana* means the sacred history of the city of Banaras told through various myths and legends.
- ¹⁶ *Parvathi* is the wife of Lord Shiva.
- ¹⁷ *Divodasa* was one of the first kings of Banaras.
- ¹⁸ *Indra*, originally a primary God during Indus Valley Civilization, is the ruler of all Gods.
- ¹⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Op. Cit., p. 13.