

Introducing the Urban platform

We have seen the eruption of an urban debate since the 1990s. All the signs of a possible urbanity – public debates on work, infrastructure, transport, the displacement of the urban poor, the heritage and the past, have broken out with a remarkable force. This year promises to highlight, even inflate those debates, and we want to use this occasion to initiate a series of long over due critical conversations on Delhi. Give the dizzying diversity of the debate we decided that the initiative should not rest with one institution. So there is not single topic but many, not one voice, not one space. The urban platform will move around the city, self organized by people joining the platform....

Delhi and its memory.

We face a curious situation. One Hundred years after the announcement of the colonial capital, Delhi stands out as one of the world's largest cities and urban regions and India's largest city of almost 17 million, and no sign of stopping. Large, massive transport networks are being set up, millions of working class people inhabit this once quietist of cities. Today Delhi bears little resemblance to the imagination of a government town in the masterplan.

Politically, despite terrible record of the treatment of its urban poor, it is in the Indian context at least a city state, a place where anti immigrant sentiment has no place, this is a city of mobile souls. Many in this room, like me, were not born in this city, and that is an important aspect of hospitality – a city that does not show active hostility towards immigrants. Old prejudices though continue, witness the impossibility of any Muslim tenant finding a house in the city.

We can see the past two decades as one of unmitigated disaster, filled with endless expansion, disastrous development, and campaigns against the urban poor. Perhaps it is all that and more. The expansion and crisis of the past decade released the ghosts of the past that call for a debate on the kind of city.

Today since the last century stands at the precipice of an exciting, yet fragile, and even anxious urbanity.

There is a schizophrenic rush to the 2010 and an anxious investment in the frenzy of cement, speed and impending spectacle around the games. If you see this landscape there is a puzzling fragility - media handouts by infrastructure providers – airports, CPWD, the metro, parallel stories of airport roofs falling

off, collapsed bridges, construction scams. No icon seems permanent, not sooner that it is built, it moves it some crisis.

What is this image, the sense of a past? It is not there in the grotesque Republic day floats, Delhi government publicity campaigns, the Games as the image of Delhi. Infrastructure the, oldest dream of cities, has emerged as the reference point for Delhi's identity. If we take the major traumatic sites in Delhi's recent history, they have all been followed by infrastructure cycles: 1857, 1947-48, the emergency, and the great displacement of Delhi's working class settlements to the periphery in the 1990s. The current frenzy around the games is not just a positioning of the city in a global landscape, it is the attempt to respond to the decades after 1977.

A city is an imaginary environment, it has a material infrastructure, but also ways in which it can allow us to recreate it, and critique its possibilities.

After the 1990s Delhi's pasts need an urgent re telling. The site of memory, when we revisit our dead, is not just revisiting the legacy and the implications of the shift after 1857, 1947 and 1977 – the massive emotional landscape that needs to be addressed. The problem for Delhi, is that its pasts are so intertwined with its present, that is the main reason for its anxiety. Can we revisit the past by not unlocking the gates of the present? For a long time we have lived in this collective schizophrenia, the dream of infrastructure can resolved the problems of the dead. This happened after 1857, after 1911, after 1911, and after 1948. But today is different. Ours can be a productive schizophrenia. The greatest asset for us is the instability of our urban present, or every attempt to stabilize the present by our elites and media managers, seems to fail. This is productive not paralyzing, it offers a great resource to reflect on the sources of our precarious and vital urbanity.

At the very moment that Delhi's pasts seem the most precarious, it may well be the best time to open them up for debate and discussion.