

Editorial

Culture, Space and the Transforming Communities: Ghettoised Perceptions Versus Mainstream Constructions

This summer having had a shared cultural experience, time and spaces in England, Turkey and Bangladesh, I list the following events, which appear to become of considerable concern to the politicians, researchers and the professionals focussing into the fields of socio-political/cultural development and urban built environment.

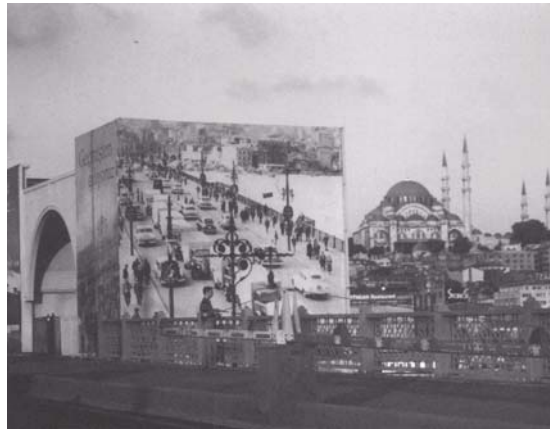


- The 22nd UIA World Congress of Architecture in Istanbul which attracted some five thousand architects/planners which included a host of social/cultural agendas.
- The announcement of London as the Olympic stage of 2012 followed by the terrifying bombing campaigns in UK capital.
- A simultaneous bomb blasts in more than 500 urban centres of Bangladesh.

On my return to Lancashire in late summer, I found the UK media coverage was choking with the reporting on the devastating effects of Katrina in New Orleans and exhaustive commentaries and analysis on 'assimilation' and 'integration' on English ethnic minorities (particularly Muslim population) following the London bombing raids. I suppose I am proposing this list in keeping with GBER readership, which has a wide remit of dealing with issues on architecture, planning, development and the environment.

Considering myself as a '*Multicultural Built-Environment Wallah*', I am tempted to share my experiences and negotiated understandings of the above events in a post-modern way as illustrated cleverly in the weekly psycho-geography column of Will Self in *The Independent*. Self relives different spaces and cultures in a psychedelic way through his past experiences and the reflections in the present. But what is troubling me is whether my perceptions will remain a marginal view or be accepted as a mainstream construction. From an academic point of view, the notions of '*margins*' and '*mainstream constructions*' are relative and will depend on the 'location of culture' (Bhabha, 1994). More precisely who says in which medium and where?

During the Istanbul World Architects Jamboree many of us enriched our sensuous geographies by being close to the historic buildings of Ottoman Empire or ferrying between Europe and the Asia part or attending fringe meetings on the fascinating theme of 'Architects without Borders'. Whereas others desperately tried to get a glimpse of their favourite '*gurus*' in the packed celebrity lectures of Zaha Hadid, Robert Venturi and Charles Correa in the lofty halls of Hilton or rocking at the jazz concerts near Bosphorus. The local organisers made huge efforts in promoting this great congress in the national media (something rarely seen in the western world) and city beautification including the lighting up of the great city landmarks of Hajia Sophia and Sulemania Mosque (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Istanbul during the Union of International Congress (UIA, 2005).

Some hundreds of parallel sessions on various aspects of global architecture (see Jamie Halsall's commentary on one of such sessions in this issue's Conference Report section), exotic model/photographic exhibitions of old Byzantine cities or artisan-made Spanish villas and the screening of innovative documentaries like master builder Mimar Sinan was simply mind blowing. But then how much of that rich experience is disseminated to the international world?

At the Istanbul Technical University's (ITU) guest house I saw the announcement of London as the chosen Olympic site of the 2012 Olympic through the satellite TV channel of BBC World. I watched the celebrations in the streets of London. I bet it was a close competition with Paris and we all understand the implications of the staging of such a global international sporting event on the local economy, particularly on the urban speculative market. However, what happened the next day would possibly have more profound implications on the political, social/cultural and urban institutions of UK. The terrifying blasts of 7 July in the streets and the undergrounds of central London. Although there was some speculation within certain quarters that such events were bound to occur, in reality it seems to have taken most by surprise. Within weeks the daily *Guardian* came out with an opinion poll survey which revealed that two thirds of respondents were suggesting links to the Iraq War. Being resilient to such a fringe opinion survey, the government has focussed more in devising stringent deportation and anti-terrorist legislations (some of which are becoming contentious with human rights groups) and addressing '*Integration*' and '*Assimilation*' debates. Suddenly the political, media and even academic institutions have started to engage vigorously with longstanding issues of '*Racism*' and '*Segregation*' (particularly relating to Muslim concentrations) in the ethnic minority urban areas of England. Meanwhile, the government has already formed a '*Task Force*' with experts from race relations and Muslim community organisations.

Before the plot thickens I fly off to Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, a city of similar population to Istanbul and of similar traffic jams and increasing number of vehicular traffic. While I have made regular visits to Dhaka since the 1980s, I am still amazed by the by the speed of the building and construction industry. Earlier this year I could see the wonderful view of Kahn's second capital from a not too distant 20 storied building, but within six months I find that the view is now blocked by a series of high rise blocks (see figure 2). The private construction industry still seems to be buoyant despite what I understand to be the stagnation of the private speculative housing market. The emergent urban crisis appears to be characterised with nightmarish traffic congestion despite the introduction of old styled

flyovers. Like in Istanbul, here too development control is not strictly put into practice. More importantly with the densification of the built environment the city now faces serious consequences with its already over burdened drainage, sewer and electricity infrastructure.

Figure 2: Louis I Kahn's National Assembly building amidst high rise private sector housing development in Dhaka, Bangladesh.



During my long break in Bangladesh I take a short trip to Khulna (probably third or fourth largest city in Bangladesh), which compared to Dhaka is for me still an archaic medium sized town of the 1960s and the 1970s India, endearingly theorised by Rondonelli's '*growth pole*' centres of the emerging third world (Rondonelli, 1983). Located less than 200 miles from Dhaka you feel that you have been suddenly thrown into an agrarian society reminiscent of the 1960s Green Revolution development of India (see figures 3 and 4). Like many other developing nations, Bangladesh still remains a very unequal society with an increasing difference between the primate capital city and the rest of the country, not to mention the existing internal inequality that tends to widen in Dhaka.

Figure 3: Agricultural land close to urban area of Khulna.



Figure 4: Informal mode of transport for the students of Khulna University.



Just before my departure from Dhaka, I wake up to the sensational news of the massive countrywide bomb blasts in around 550 large to small urban centres of Bangladesh. What is different with these blasts is that, unlike the big blasts in Baghdad, these were smaller scale explosions carried out with almost DIY-style devices operated through small size batteries. While we are getting accustomed to ferocious attacks in the Middle Eastern urban centres of Israel, Palestine, Iraq or Afghanistan, nowadays such phenomenon are catching up with South and South East Asia not to mention of the occasional occurrences in Western Europe. By using the blanket term of *'Terrorist Attacks'* it does not help us in identifying either the political sensitivity or the regional, locational or cultural specificity of the motives and how to address the emerging serious problem.

Under such perspectives, the current debate in UK on the apparent alienation or segregation of the ethnic minorities (particularly that of the Muslim population) is perhaps a good move towards addressing the deep rooted causes of urban deprivation, racism, segregation and separate developments (Jackson, 2005 pp167-175).

By the time I am back in sleepy Lancashire in the late summer the media world is getting hyped with the devastating effects of Katrina on New Orleans. Looking at the spectacular footage of the waterlogged built environment of what is now termed as the less prosperous southern state of the US with a predominantly black population, the image that came to my mind through a mental mapping was that of the *'Caribbean Islands'* or maybe some African setting. In a way it was a surreal scenario with neighbourhoods completely submerged under water with the faces of desperate people (see figure 5) only to be reminded of less developed countries. Unlike the images of gated communities, spacious roads and large automobiles that we are accustomed to seeing in the Hollywood movies, this time the media pointed a finger towards the deprivation in the Southern black majority states of America.

Figure 5: New Orleans residents try to find dry ground.

Website: www.katrinahelp.com/hurricane-katrina-picture...

In all, both the personal and the mediated images of the cities and spaces made me think of the transforming communities, a subject which we have dealt with in GBER issues and have now managed to compile in a volume based on a number of past issues titled '*Cities in Transition: Transforming the Global Built Environment*' (Shakur, 2005). We will be interested to know the readers response to the views expressed in this volume by academics from around the world.

I am pleased to inform you that with financial assistance from the Geographical Association we also managed to produce a well-bound print issue of our last themed volume of 'Compact Cities and Sustainability' which was guest edited by Michael Clark. Also in line with '*fair publishing/printing*', we produced this smart edition in association with North South University's Architecture department (in Dhaka Bangladesh). For such a successful joint venture sincere credits go to our Assistant Editor Jamie Halsall for data compilation and transfer, Michael Clark for securing funds and Professor Mahbubur Rahman of NSU who has now joined the GBER editorial team. With this issue GBER enters into its fifth year and I take this opportunity to thank both our editorial/production team and the readers/subscribers for their great contribution towards the development of this free online international journal.

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