Kolkata Flower Market

KOLKATA

Hardly any other city evokes images as intense, wide-ranging and truly urban as Calcutta (recently renamed Kolkata). Simultaneously described as the "Second City of the Empire", "City of Palaces", "Paris of India", the nation's cultural capital, a daily festival of human existence, a celebration of life, a plethora of suffering, the "City of Dreadful Nights" (Rudyard Kipling) and even as "God's excrement" (Günter Grass: *Scheisshaufen Gottes*) Kolkata is a manifestation of urban conditions if there ever was one. We will continue our urban research at ETH Studio Basel with an investigation on this east Indian metropolis.

Having been the economical center of the Indian subcontinent and the capital of the British Raj from the 18th century until 1912, Kolkata has since then undergone major phases of reshaping and reorganization with a deep impact on the city's fabric. The move of representational and administrative functions to New Delhi in the beginning of the 20th century created a vacuum in the city that was only deepened when – the country upon its independence splitting into India and Pakistan – the city lost most of its hinterland and suddenly finding itself located at the eastern fringe of the newly formed nation. When Bangladesh fought its secessionist war against Pakistan in 1971, the city became the destination of hundred thousands of refugees fleeing the conflict. The activities of Mother Theresa and other charity organizations have since then reinforced the city's image of urban squalor. In more recent years Kolkata has established itself as a center of cultural production and is occupying an ever more central place in the global economy with the rising importance of its IT and communications sector.

One of the major factors that has shaped the city, and continues to do so in probably more acute ways than before, is water. Water has always been an important element in Indian city planning, and has been employed to created microclimates, wells, tanks, areas for washing, recreation and ritual, which now dot the urban landscape. Located on the Hooghly River, one of the main distributaries of the Ganges delta, Kolkata is unremittingly exposed to water. Regularly experiencing major floods during the times of the monsoon, it is also frequently facing tropical cyclones from the Bay of Bengal, at times bringing devastation and death to the area. With unfolding climate change, the city is ever more feeling the need to respond urbanistically to new dangers and challenges. Being located at an altitude just barely above sea-level, any increase in floodings or rise of the water level poses fundamental risks to the city. Due to this urgency, Kolkata finds itself in a strategic position with urbanistic responses to climate change necessarily having to be developed, tested out and implemented in the nearest future.

Since India's independence Kolkata has grown rapidly and multiplied in size to reach a population of approximately 15 million inhabitants, making it one of the world's largest metropolitan areas. It has seen a vast influx of immigrants from today's Pakistan and Bangladesh, growing rapidly in times of war. Today exposed to a steady influx of rural-urban migrants, combined with natural growth, adding almost 400.000 people to the urban population every year, in the future it might find itself in the center of massive movements of climate refugees. How does a city cope with these elementary conditions of climate change while simultaneously experiencing rapid growth? Does it expand steadily or grow in stages with phases of stagnation, reinventing itself while growing, or holding on to an original identity, whether mythical or real? Kolkata can be seen as a showcase for the widest range of urban planning principles and concepts of the city. Fragments of rigourously planned cities, even ideal cities, are located next to historical urban fabric, areas of infrastructure and slums. Could we see Kolkata as a universe of urban conditions? What are the plans for the city's future development and how could we conceive of an outlook not only in terms of threats and dangers, but as a future of latent potentials?

Program

It is these and other issues that the Kolkata Thesis Project will be engaged in. After Nairobi, Metrobasel, Canary Islands and Napoli we continue the series of international urban portraits with the study of Kolkata. Instead of understanding the city as a system composed of binary opposites, such as formal and informal parts, the study attempts to unfold the very complex simultaneity and dependencies of these parameters, carefully tracing the basic human activities and their spaces they unfold in. Instead of an approach centered around preconceived grand dichotomies, we would like to focus on the activities on the local scale and follow questions such as how people live, work or move around in the city. The Kolkata Thesis Project is part of a larger ongoing urban research project; under the title of "Specificity and Global Urbanization" a comparative study of global processes of urbanization is being developed, bringing together some of our past research with the upcoming ones. This research program is based on the assumption that contemporary cities do not develop towards a common vanishing point but rather consolidate, transform or adapt their specific traits. These processes are not only undertaken through their local specificity or historical tradition, but by developing new modalities of transformation and novel forms of differentiation in the wake of the contemporary global networks. Cities are hence drawn back to their own material configuration through the processes of globalisation. The result of the project on "Specificity" will be a series of publications, with the Kolkata Project representing a major part of it.

Semester Organization

ETH StudioBasel is located in Basel, where students will work and be assisted by staff of the institute. All students will travel to Kolkata for a two-week fieldwork phase during October 2008 (complusory). In Kolkata, students will be able to conduct the research in groups of two, also joining with local partners and students. Emphasis is laid on the cooperation with local actors and organizations such as the Dept. of Architecture at Jadavpur University, local NGOs and with the Center for Development and Environment Policy at the Indian Institute of Management amongst others. The results of the fieldwork in Kolkata and the further project development will use architectural portraits, urban biographies, as well as employing standard techniques such as maps and diagrams, whilst also sketching scenarios for a future of the city. The final presentation of the student's works will be in the form of a book and a slide presentation. The previewed costs of the project will be 1.500,- CHF. Students who are receiving stipends and grants, or who have been exempted from school fees can seek financial assistance by the ETH. (Application forms are available through Mrs. Giordano, HIL E 73.3)

Fall Semester 2008 Kolkata Program

NOTE: ALL DATES ARE PRELIMINARY AND SUBJECT TO CHANGE

SEP	17	**Start**	Basel	Introduction Studio Basel
	18	Themes	Basel	Distribution of Drills, Themes & Kolkata Atlas Project
	23	Studio Work	Basel	
	24	Studio Work	Basel	
	30	Studio Work	Basel	
OCT	01	Studio Work	Basel	
	07	Studio Work	Basel	
	08	Studio Work	Basel	
	14	Studio Work	Basel	
	15	Studio Work	Basel	**Jury / Presentation of Kolkata Atlas Project**
	19	**Kolkata Trip**	Kolkata	Kolkata Trip starts
	20		Kolkata	
	21		Kolkata	
	22		Kolkata	
	23		Kolkata	
	24		Kolkata	
	25		Kolkata	
	26		Kolkata	**Zwischenkritik / Mid-Term Jury**
	27		Kolkata	
	28		Kolkata	
	29		Kolkata	
	30		Kolkata	
	31		Kolkata	
NOV	01		Kolkata	
	02	**Kolkata Trip Ends**		
	04	Studio Work	Basel	
	05	Studio Work	Basel	
	11	Studio Work	Basel	
	12	Studio Work	Basel	
	18	Studio Work	Basel	
	19	Studio Work	Basel	
DEC	25	Studio Work	Basel	
	26	**Mid-Term Jury**	Basel	**Zwischenkritik / Mid-Term Jury**
	02	Studio Work	Basel	
	03	Studio Work	Basel	
	09	Studio Work	Basel	
	10	Studio Work	Basel	
	16	Studio Work	Basel	
	17	**Final Jury**	Basel	**All Day Final Jury** Indian Party