Venture Capital

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with Satya Pemmaraju and R. Gerard Pietrusko

Cities also grow in their unbuilding. This observation, made by many writers in different contexts, produces an uneasy equivalence between destruction and construction. But particular modes of destruction and their effects retain their potency in the manner in which cities are reinscribed. In the case of Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1996), I argue that the alignment of territory with an imaginary map, in the course of events such as the communal violence of 1992 and its serial bombing in 1993, is intimately tied to the redirection of large amounts of capital into new construction, even if the relationship between reconstruction and destruction is not self-evident. For example, historic preservation too braids destruction and reconstruction together but in a shell that retains the past as physical identity.

The delirious production of a vertical city began in the repressed aftermath of the riots and blasts, which had already displaced vast numbers of people, slowly but surely. Rumor had it that large numbers of Muslims left the city after the riots and entire neighborhoods moved ever so slightly, one kilometer at a time, to

I thank Claudio Lomnitz for inviting me to put this piece together. I also thank all the artists who trusted me with their images and who made special efforts to connect with my work. Satya Pemmaraju, who has just completed a book of images based on the new economy of Hyderabad (Last Mile/Electric Sheep), took the time to produce three new images for this piece. Robert Gerard Pietrusko, both a valued interlocutor and a design consultant for my book in preparation, processed images generously provided by Gautam Pemmaraju of Mumbai from the music video that his design house Maxi produced for the U.K.-based music artist State of Bengal. Gautam himself provided much encouragement over the years during which I worked in Mumbai, and his photographs and video work shot on Mumbai’s myriad postindustrial locations have been a steady source of inspiration. I also wish to thank Lebbeus Woods, whose work inspired me well before I met him and who kindly agreed to put his images into dialogue with these images inspired directly by Mumbai. I also thank Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge for their sustained interest in and encouragement to my project.
accommodate themselves to the new geography of the city, postviolence. In a parallel circulation of destruction and reconstruction, the application of new rules for building, which involved the resettlement and “rehabilitation” of slum-dwellers, allowed for large-scale demolitions to take place and allowed the occupation of space thus “freed” by real-estate capital. Like the riots and their fields of killing and death, the destructive unveiling of city qua territory by the bomb blasts exists in a spectral relation to the uncertainty unleashed by the systematic demolition of the city’s productive economy. The closure of its mills and factories, the demoralization and immiseration of its vast numbers of “toilers,” and the progressive loss of the traffic of goods through its docks set into motion a catastrophic, speculative appetite for spaces evacuated by this industrial city.

The blasts, it is said, turned the city itself into a weapon and war machine against itself as cosmopolis. But this fragile cosmopolis, it seems, was little more than a space of neighborhoods with identifiable “sensitive areas” and “trouble spots” (to use the language of police maps), which would erupt periodically into paroxysms of predictable violence. In the aftermath of the blasts, the city has become an arena inscribed by the capacity of state and private power to displace, unsettle, and rearrange populations at scale, placing them within new temporal forms and new institutional platforms for making claims. These operations of power have cultivated subjects neither fully delinked from previous territorial arrangements nor fully committed to the new forms of residence that they have been forced to adopt.

The work of various “artists in demolition” (Haussmann’s self-description) thus converges on the production of a new city, whose half-built forms conceal the work of the gaze of capital—a gaze that is preoccupied with ruins, destruction, and debris as clues and as evidence of space yet to come. This gaze has increasingly come to signify the venture of contemporary capital in the era of mega-construction and infrastructure projects. Catastrophe is neither the beginning of the work of this imagination nor violence its terminus. But it is certain that the blasted city put into play a whole series of appropriations and battles for the space of the city that involved an embrace of risk by many different actors, from “speculator-developers” investing risk capital in real-estate products to ordinary residents seeking to retain their footing in the midst of rapid transformation.

1. Appadurai (2000) makes the connection between the riots and demolitions, suggesting that a “spectral” connection exists between the “cleansing” of the urban poor and the kind of ethnic cleansing that occurred during the riots. I am interested here in how this cleared space is then occupied by circulating capital.

2. The term “speculator-developer” is used in light of Harvey 1978.
But the risk assumed by the speculator-developer, intent on turning Mumbai into a “world-class city,” is less in the realm of uncertainty and more in the realm of inscribing a new relation to the future. In so doing, the speculator-developer appears to engage in a very particular interpretation of speculation, drawing on its etymological roots of specere, to gaze, speculari, to spy out from the confines of the specula, the watchtower. He deploys architecture to speculative effect upon the fabric of the blasted city, actualizing a version of the future and minimizing uncertainties about the future through the physiognomic transformations of the city. The debris of a city leveled both by war among communities and by routine demolitions of the cities of the poor are thus recycled into a dead, unhuman space through the supposed vitality of speculation in the realm of architectural production. I am inspired to make this argument by reference to the work of Lebbeus Woods, the visionary architect-artist whose pronouncement, “Architecture is war. War is architecture,” made in the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the destruction of Sarajevo, remains one of the most provocative and prescient understandings of our contemporary relationship to architecture. Woods writes:

The ideas commonly described as “construction” and “destruction” need to be examined in the context of the paradoxicality inherent in experience. . . . Few thoughtful people would fail to acknowledge that in order to build, something must be destroyed. . . . The act of building and its consequences . . . remain highly “unnatural,” . . . they introduce new forms of entropy into the existing environment. . . . They produce buildings that begin to decay even as they are built. . . . But that is not the only paradox to be realized. Building is by its very nature an aggressive, even warlike act. . . . No society is rich enough to build all the buildings it “needs,” if, that is, it takes into account the demands of all its people. . . . The building is little more than an instrument of denial. But at great expense and on a monumental scale, it is also nothing less than an instrument of war. (Woods 1995: 49–50)

This relation between war and architecture, destruction and construction, is the subject of the images gathered together in this essay. Each set of three images—two explicitly with reference to Bombay-Mumbai and the third set taken from Woods’s drawings for his Sarajevo reconstruction projects—draw, in their own

3. The idea of a “world-class city” is retailed by a number of organizations, including Bombay First, an NGO started by elite citizens and corporate interests to “save” Mumbai from what they perceived to be its disastrous urban future, a place overrun by slums, unemployed persons, and arcane regulations that were actively preventing international capital from investing in the city, according to their rhetoric.
way, on that space where the real meets its speculative, aggressive counterpart. Each set references a specific kind of erasure, whose spectral presence in turn haunts the new city. In turning to images, I follow Ackbar Abbas’s suggestion of “using the photograph as a means of seeing what is involved in looking at and thinking about the city.” “The visual,” he writes, “is a means of interrogating visuality. Not just an optical unconscious; a spatial unconscious as well” (Abbas 1997: 91).

These images of Bombay-Mumbai are processings of “real” images, or, in other words, of the actually existing contemporary landscapes of the city. My contention is that the very presence of these contemporary landscapes—not yet fully realized but reaching forward to a new city—has had a speculative effect on the imagination of future urban complexion and on the texture of social relations. In one set of images—drawn from a video set to the music of the British-Asian group State of Bengal—the spectral juxtaposition of the Muslim woman, the gendered subject of erasure, against the phallic imaginary of the factory chimney and the desolate marshes of postindustrial Mumbai, symbolic of the industrial city which is being actively dismantled, reflects on the braiding together of multiple erasures. In more than one sense, the entire city is a site under preparation where it is impossible to distinguish the half-destroyed from the half-constructed except when put into dialogue with the haunting presence of these figures lost in transition.

In Pemmaraju’s images, on the other hand, no subject appears on the horizon except as the ghostly afterimage of the speculator, gazing out at a space of possibility and profit. Space is rendered dead and unhuman. It acquires a pure “objectality” and opacity through its saturation. Color suffuses, even suffocates space and acts as the agent of the speculative imagination, presented by the artist in a mock-narrative sequence. This sequence reflects the actual processing of urban space in Mumbai—from slums to luxury real-estate properties for the rich and rehabilitation barracks for the less rich. The “maquillage” of these images reveals a city on the edge, dreaming itself into existence but also putting its residents on edge, alert to the possibilities that remain to be seized. If “neighborhood gives identity” and “frontiers snatch it away,” as Marshall McLuhan puts it, then these images are themselves at the frontiers of new ways of seeing the inexorable transformation of the city of neighborhoods into the city of dead streets under the spectral gaze of capital. Committed to following the process of constant makeover—which cities like Mumbai seem to have entered at a frenetic pace only recently—these pictures mimic that process by the elaborate maquillage, the treatment given to a “real” or “standard” digital image.
Woods’s drawings, on the other hand, are adventures in the realm of architectural imagination. They challenge architectural notions of “predictive designs,” embracing instead the crisis of the damaged city and providing “heuristic aides, guides that will stimulate transformations by others” (1997: 13). His theory of everyday war, of the continuities between everyday destruction and the damages of war, lead him to a particular perception of space, that of the edge where continuous crisis is most visible. Conceiving the war-damaged city in this spirit, his drawings exhort architects to employ new practices, to invert the imperative of design to “control future events by the implementation of programs of use” and instead to “set into motion events that result in unpredictable forms of building and living” (1997: 30). The images reproduced here, from Woods’ Sarajevo reconstruction projects, form a sequence exemplifying his attempt at drawing architecture in such a way as to highlight precisely its qualities as space lived many times over, making visible “ghosts of its former incarnation.” These ghosts inhabit the new, they are accommodated as a political act that does not shy away from war as architecture or from architecture as war and instead strives to create a new visual language to describe this concept.

These images thus serve as speculations that make specters and traces visible in the context of active destruction, that turn away from acts of preservation to engage actively with the ethics of the gaze, venturing into new vocabularies of the visual.

References


With cities, it is as with dreams. . . . But even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear.

— Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities
A wall . . . can be metaphorical, but it can also be literal. In the latter case, it acquires an immediate tectonic presence, and at an architectural scale may become a room, a street or a city. Or the wall may become pure space, in other words, the negation of architectonic mass and materiality and of the comforting assurance of their cause-and-effect certainty. There are always people who come to inhabit the difficult spaces of the wall. They are the people of crisis, pushed unwillingly to confrontation with limits, borderline cases of every sort, adventurers, criminals, inventors, con artists, opportunists, people who cannot, or have not been allowed to, fit in elsewhere. They are nomads of the body, refugees of the mind, restless, itinerant, looking without much chance of finding a sure way either forward or back. Instead they turn the situation to an advantage, making uncertainty a virtue, and strangeness an ally.

— Lebbeus Woods, Radical Reconstruction
The true purpose of Hausmann’s work was to secure the city against civil war. . . . Hausmann gave himself the name of “artist in demolition.”

—Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”
Photograph: Vyjayanthi Rao

Photograph courtesy of Maxi
Video stills courtesy of State of Bengal and Maxi