Urban triptych

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DENSELY packed labyrinthine streets are lined with higgledy-piggledy constructions. Lean blocks rise skyward beside squat single-storey buildings framed by clouds. Shops have sprung up on every step and along each wall. A young man makes and sells jewellery under the overhang of an air conditioner. Others sit huddled between the vertical stacks of books that line the walkways. The nut seller, a regular fixture at the mouth of one of the area's many gullies, inspects his display as he awaits a customer.

Avenue Road is the city's wholesale market. Every inch of its pavements, every step, corner and crevice sports some commercial enterprise. It is said to be the smallest area with the largest volume of financial transactions in Asia. It is the hub from which Bengaluru grew.

People and goods snake their way in and out of busy lanes that radiate in all directions. Handcarts, trolleys, tempos, two-wheelers weighted down in front and back: every conceivable means of ferrying goods may be seen here. Men and women expertly balance loads on their heads, carry long steel rods between them or roll cables coiled like Ferris wheels alongside the curb.

Shops occupy the ground floor of buildings. Offices and homes are most often to be found on the floors above. As one steps into the dark and musty entrance to climb the invariably rickety stairs, the noise of the street quickly falls away. It is as if one is entering an-

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other space and time. How is it that the energy and bustle of the street does not intrude into the interior of these buildings?

Past and present coexist in amiable, unselfconscious contiguity. Art deco, lattice woodwork and tube lights are neighbours with glass facades, plastic cladding and recessed tungsten bulbs. The homes at the rear of shop fronts or on the floors above them retain many original features, iron beams from Middlesborough, UK, rosewood panels, brass light switches. Often the only evident break with the past is the decision to use a single colour in painting the interior; multiple and contrasting shades were earlier used to highlight the detailing.

No single aesthetic dominates. Both inside and outside exemplify an exuberant and casual mix of old and new. Such promiscuity may be offensive to one who longs for the coherence and order of an integrated sensibility. But it is this diversity that gives Avenue Road its particular charm.

There is no place from which to get a bird's eye view, a sense of this area in its entirety. It can be experienced only in the density of its details: the temple, the shoe seller, the flower vendor, the *jalebiwallah*, the jeweller, the textile showroom, the stationary kiosk, the *shambrani* swirling as the young man from the mosque undertakes his daily round of blessing. Every aspect is a world unto itself, many layered and richly engrossing.

Avenue Road is akin to a river; to experience it one must be willing to be part of its flow even if only temporarily. There is no way to stand apart, to look from a distance, or look down from above at the teeming activity below. One cannot relate to it from the sequestered comfort of one's car. The only option is to walk its streets.

The city is planning to widen Avenue Road. A straight line is expected to cut a swath across the maze of lanes, flattening buildings and scattering people and businesses to some other, as yet undisclosed, location. What will be the repercussions of destroying structures that lean into and against each other on all fronts? Thousands will be displaced.

To those in favour of this plan it is a small price to pay for transforming Bengaluru into a 'global city'. To those critical of this approach to urban development no sacrifice is worth the destruction of life worlds that will necessarily follow. Residents and businesses on Avenue Road are divided on the issue. Some would prefer to move to a modern location. They sense that the new elite of young, well paid professionals is reluctant to wander its bylanes. Others propose shifting the wholesale businesses elsewhere so that the retail shops can continue in a less crowded milieu.

Even as practical solutions are debated a key cultural and existential issue remains unexplored: what are the consequences of substituting the multiplicity of logics that comprise the ecosystem of Avenue Road today, with the singular and hierarchical paradigm that underwrites the dominant approach to urban development, one that treats all perspectives other than its own as antiquated and in need of revision?

The question is not based on a nostalgic desire for the old or a suspicion of modernity per se. There is much room for improvement of the physical space and infrastructure for those who live, work or shop on Avenue Road. Furthermore, it is a known fact that caste and religious tensions interweave the interdependencies that characterize lives and livelihoods here. This is no utopian space.

Notwithstanding this, the prevailing ethos accepts diversity as an organizing principle of life activity and implicitly honours cooperation and interdependence as necessary virtues. Shops permit pavement vendors to store merchandise on their premises at the end of each day. Traditional practices of alms giving and receiving are part of the daily routine. A moral economy of reciprocity is evident. Is this why there is no frenzy on the street despite the large numbers of people, goods and vehicles that traverse it each day?

The push to create global cities (the current face of modernity in the realm of urban planning) brings an altogether different perspective to bear on the social organization of space. It conceives of roads as transit passages. Motorized vehicles are privileged over all other modes of transportation while pedestrians have virtually no rights despite outnumbering all other road users. This framework also has unambiguous views on what constitutes legitimate street activity. Pavement vendors and hawkers whose right to exist is presently nurtured will instantly become trespassers to be evicted. An interdependent community will be disaggregated into those who own property and those who do not.

Avenue Road as it presently exists cannot survive the implementation of road widening. Its world defies that of the modernizers of today. Though hierarchical, it is an accommodative space in which the interests of many are taken into account at least to some degree. Avenue Road evinces much of what modernity celebrates: economic enterprise, ingenuity, commercial success. But it does so in its own semi-feudal manner. As a result it sets aside two virtues dear to modernity, individualism and self-sufficiency. History as well as current events suggest that this may not necessarily be a bad thing.

A street is not a road. True, they are synonyms. But street evokes much more. Roads connect points in space. They are moving corridors. Metalled, unmetalled, raised, sunken, potholed, mud-packed, gravel-laden thoroughfares.

Streets are life worlds. People in action, cultures in play. The street is a theatre of contiguity, chance, conflict and conviviality. A delicate, imprecise equilibrium.

The broader semantic range of street is evident in our language. 'Street smart', 'the Arab street' and 'the man on the street' express how the street is a site of sociocultural negotiation and political expression. While 'Dalal Street', 'Main Street', and 'Wall Street' are examples of named locations that symbolize ideas even more than specific geographical coordinates. By contrast, 'one for the road', 'hit the road' or 'road movie' retain the relation of road to journeying, to the process of moving through.

So it is that while boulevard, way, route, path, avenue, lane or drive may suffice as alternatives to either word, there are others that apply to street alone. And these have to do with its meaning as cohabited space: residents, locals, occupants, dwellers, neighbhourhood.

The tension between road and street is manifest in how widening a road can actually narrow a street in this broader sense. Street life is in inverse proportion to road width. Its vitality depends on either side of a road being within earshot of one another; on people, sound and activity traversing back and forth with ease. Two halves of a whole in fluid embrace.

This requires that a road be imagined in relation to the community it embeds; one axis among others in a living quadrant. Not merely as a conduit to and from privileged destinations.

When roads are not conceived as streets, they trespass. They encroach upon and infringe the variegated rhythms of life. Its diagonals, zigzags and recursive loops; its alternatingly casual, purposeful, meandering character. Its improvisational nature.

The road becomes a border. Slicing through neighbourhoods, hemming in segments, reconfiguring localities. Reminding us of the relation of road to raid: hostile incursion against person or district, foray. This meaning of road common in the 16th century is obsolete in the 20th. But its sense lingers in our use of the word 'inroad'. And in our experience of the consequences of city planning that focuses not on streets but on roads.

The concerted effort to create global cities out of our sprawling conurbations has pitted two logics against each other. Our cities have evolved over time. They have accommodated existing social relationships with their hierarchies and tensions and even managed, at times, to gradually modulate their impact on the lives of residents. Cities have grown by a relatively organic (though not benign) process of adaptation, flexibility, accretion.

People have been central to this story. Cold anonymity has not been a feature of our urbanism. Even in dire accounts of city life in India human succour has been present. It is people who have dynamised our streets. Still, as with Avenue Road, it has been a case of permitting coexistence without creating the conditions in which all can thrive. This explains the physical state of our cities and the challenges of the urban poor.

The global city is grounded in a different premise. It is obsessed with spatiality and appearance. For better as well as for worse, our cities have thus far tended to emphasize people over the spaces they inhabit (prioritize would be too strong a term given the woeful conditions in which people have had to live). By contrast the so-called global city is an ideal that has little to do with existing conditions of urban life in India. Its success would require not just the disappearance of structures, but of the people that currently live, work, love and dream in and around them.

Our social ecology comprises a complex set of interdependencies that cannot be willed away. The present is not merely a staging ground for a desired future. The facts that constitute it cannot be ignored. The vision of a city of malls and skyscrapers, chrome and glass, whose streets are empty of people is illusory. There is no room in it for the majority. In any case, as many have pointed out, it overlooks the reliance on domestic and other help of the class whose fantasy it represents. The demand for a proximate labour pool will likely ensure that the streets remain lively though perhaps treacherous to use given the interloper status increasingly ascribed to pedestrians.

The choice cannot be between traditional areas filled with people and warmth but short on facilities, and an urban redevelopment which privatizes and disciplines public space depriving most citizens of access to the commons. This would be to substitute one form of indifference for another. An approach that de facto privileges a small segment of society and criminalizes the majority is even more regressive than the current attitude of 'live and let subsist' which has done little to enable the majority to flourish.

The conflict is not between those for and against development but between those willing to confront the economic, demographic, social, cultural and ecological facts and those who are not. This latter group which includes a wide cross section of the in-

telligentsia in the government and corporate sector is in the thrall of an abstraction called 'the global city'. And it is prepared to pursue it relentlessly. It is thus that any dialogue promptly dissembles to reveal an ideological divide impervious to evidence and reason.

Not surprising then that urban planning has become a carnivalesque disregard of reality: road medians that need to be scaled, flyovers built within a whisker of buildings, the privileging of private over public transportation, the absence of planning for the thousands displaced by this quest for a city that looks a certain way.

The road widening plan for Avenue Road is a case in point. Even prior to the issue of rehabilitation is the following question: how practical is to demolish buildings on either side of a main street of this rabbit warren-like area when the likelihood of taking down adjoining structures at their rear is a virtual given? The plan to widen it seems concerned only with creating a broad road and not with its feasibility or consequences.

The divisions that have characterized our society, caste, gender (at times religion) have been reflected in the spatial organization of our cities and towns. It is a thoroughly inequitable order, but it has until now recognised interdependency. In particular caste and gender as hierarchical systems have actively required those deemed 'the other' in order to function at all. Social hierarchy and spatial proximity have accordingly been intrinsic features of urban life.

The elite of today equally depend on the labour of the poor and working classes. Yet, so taken are many by a certain conception of what makes a global city that they have begun to act as if what exists does not. Thus a city teeming with people can be imagined as a network of pipes, drains, power cables, traffic corridors, cellphone towers, metro stations and ring roads (peripheral and inner) that lead to and from a mythical area called the central business district which is frequently not the commercial hub.

In a similar vein, trees become 'green cover' or 'lung spaces', seen to add colour or to function as a back-up respiratory system for humans, with no life of their own. And lakes are dubbed 'water bodies', a term that occludes their being sources of livelihood as well as home to fish, birds, lotuses, lilies and reeds. Encroachment of lakes is surreptitiously permitted and in due course regularized, even while a select few are handed over to private players to be dredged, cleaned and developed for leisure use by those who can afford to pay.

The state of a city's infrastructure is considered key to its claim to being global. Infrastructure refers to 'the substructure or underlying foundation.' It has come to mean a city's civic amenities: roads, power, drains, water, sanitation, transportation. This conception inverts the real basis of a city; its *raison d'être*. Cities are places where *people* have gathered in substantial numbers to work and live. Amenities merely address the collective needs of inhabitants. The real foundation of any city is its people.

Equally salient is the notion of substructure, one connotation of which is 'that which holds something together.' If one were to identify such an underlying principle in city life it would surely be interdependence. Work and life are inherently cooperative processes. Planning that is not premised on the reality of interdependent collaboration, and development that does not integrate it in every aspect of design and implementation, stands little chance of success especially in the long term.