THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON THE USE OF STREET SPACE IN THREE CITIES IN TAMIL NADU, INDIA:

CHENNAI, PONDICHERRY, AND MADURAI

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ABSTRACT

‘Think of a city and what comes to mind? It is the streets. If a city’s streets look interesting the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull (Jacobs, 1961). Street life is not only of contemporary interest. The appearance of city streets was recorded by artists and architects of the Renaissance including Perruzzi, Bramante, Michelangelo, and Piranesi (Bacon, 1969). The interest continues as street activities is photographed and recorded in writings, movies, etc. A developing country of rich, diverse culture like Incredible India certainly fascinates us with incredible streets. The multifunctional structure of the Indian street provides an admixture of overlapping spaces that merge public and private, work and leisure, and holy and profane activities (Edensor, 1998). This research examine the culture of the Indian streets in Tamil Nadu: Chennai, Pondicherry, and Madurai, to provide a contrast to the routine and predictable modern day streets and its urban design, with the Indian streets which is less regulated yet express strongly vibrant street life, revealing the Indian people’s way of life. The key principle during the field study and the analysis that follows is to understand the social system, culture and belief system of the studied context, in order to understand and comprehend their behavior on the streets and the use of street space. This research will enhance the understanding of the actual function of space which can be used as reference data for urban design, to be responsive in specific cultural context, such as the Indian streets in Tamil Nadu.

(Keywords: Culture, Use of Street Space, Chennai, Madurai, Pondicherry)

ABSTRAK

Fikir tentang sebuah Bandar dan apakah yang timbul di dalam pemikiran anda? Ia adalah jalan. Sekiranya jalan di Bandar kelihatan menarik, maka Bandar juga kelihatan menarik; sekiranya ia kelihatan pudar, maka Bandar juga kelihatan pudar (Jacobs, 1961). *Street life* (Kehidupan jalan) bukan sahaja penarikan zaman ini. Rupa jalan Bandar telah direkodkan oleh pelukis dan arkitek di era Renaissance, antaranya termasuk Perruzzi, Bramante, Michelangelo, dan Piranesi (Bacon, 1969). Penarikan tersebut berterusan dengan aktiviti-aktiviti jalan direkodkan dalam gambar foto dan catatan dalam sastera, wayang dan sebagainya. Sesebuah negara membangun yang kaya dengan kepelbagaian budaya seperti *Incredible* (Mustahil) India sememangnya memikat hati kita dengan jalannya juga. Struktur jalan di India yang berkepelbagaian fungsi dan membekalkan ruang yang bertimbun campur, yang menggaulkan aktiviti-aktiviti awam dengan persendirian, pekerjaan dengan rekreasi, dan yang suci dengan yang sebaliknya (Edensor, 1998). Penyelidikan ini mengkaji tentang budaya jalan di India di Tamil Nadu: Chennai, Pondicherry, dan Madurai, untuk mendedahkan satu kontrast antara reka bentuk jalan pada zaman moden ini yang selalunya mengikuti aturan biasa, dengan jalan di India yang kurang dikawal peraturan tetapi menggambarkan *street life* yang bersemangat dan menunjukkan cara hidup masyarakat India. Prinsip utama sewaktu kajian tapak dan analisis yang berikutnya bertujuan untuk memahami sysetm social, budaya dan kepercayaan di dalam konteks tapak kajian. Ini adalah untuk memahami keperilakuan manusia di jalan dan cara menggunakan ruang jalan. Penyelidikan ini akan menambahkan pemahaman terhadap fungsi sebenar ruang jalan, dan boleh digunakan sebagai data rujukan untuk reka bentuk Bandar, agar lebih responsif di sesebuah konteks budaya, contohnya di jalan di Tamil Nadu, India.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This research examines the influence of culture on the use of street space in the streets of three cities in Tamil Nadu, South India: Chennai, Pondicherry, and Madurai. These three selected study area are the three major cities in Tamil Nadu, South India which is known for its preserved genuine Indian culture. These three cities, each represent a different settings: Chennai as the state capital, Pondicherry as a former French colony, and Madurai as the traditional Indian temple city. The primary objective is to observe local culture associated with human activities on the streets in these cities. The parameters of culture considered in this research are religion and beliefs, economic culture, lifestyle and behaviour.

Culture expresses itself in both physical objects and subjective responses to the environment (Fan Ng, 1998). Therefore, culture can influence the use of street space and the character of street in a particular setting, in this case, the streets in India. Rapoport (1987) argues that cultural variables are primary for any activity, including walking and others, occurring in streets. It is culture that structures behaviour and helps explain the use or non-use of streets and other urban spaces – or of other settings. Thus, the use of streets by pedestrians is primarily culturally based as physical environment does not totally determine behaviour, as in this research context, the culturally rich and diverse India.

Omar (2007) in his research on the human activity in covered urban space, states that urban streets are one of the important physical elements of a city. The street is a place where human activities are concentrated. It functions mainly as a channel of movement that connects one place to the other. The multi-functions of a street have been stated by various scholars including Jacobs (1961); Rykwert (1986); Czaenowsky (1986); Moughtin (2003); Rapoport (1987) and Jacobs (1993). The roles of streets in an urban life can be summarised as follows: street is a channel of movement, a communication space, a public space, a place of social and commercial encounter, and exchange, a place to do business, a political space as well as a symbolic and ceremonial space in the city. He also explained that streets of Asian cities have specialities and significance in the context of urban public life. An Asian street has cultural and traditional functions in the city. It serves as a public space, a place where people come together to do commerce, to eat and to socialize. Similarly, Poerbo (2004) argues that the urban realm of many Asian cities is not attributed to great parks, squares, or even boulevards, as that in many European cities. On the contrary, the urban life takes place on the streets and along its corridors. The narrow tunnel in the front of buildings and corridor has become a suitable space to move and to interact with each other (Poerbo, 2004).

This chapter presents the overall structure of the study. The research problem was explored in the second section. This is followed by the research assumption. Research questions in the fourth section. The fifth section highlights the aim of the research, and is followed by the study objectives. The seventh section establishes the scope and limitations of the research. The final section presents the research methodology and techniques.

1.2 Problem Statement

This research examine the culture of the Indian streets, to provide a contrast to the routine and predictable modern day streets and its urban design, with the Indian streets which is less regulated yet express strongly the Indian people's way of life. It is important that explorations of the street should not fall into the ethnocentric pitfalls of so many social and cultural theories, which examine distinct Western contexts and produce ideas that are taken as universally applicable. However established theories will be referred to as a guide and comparison throughout the study. The principle aim is to examine the rich diversity of social activity in Indian streets.

As urban planners increasingly recognize the ethno-cultural diversity of cities, urban design practice must be just as responsive if it is to remain integral to urban planning. While cultural diversity is a widely acknowledged component of many cities, discussion of cultural diversity is rare in urban design circles. Perhaps this neglect is because urban design practice is based on universalistic principles and is commonly oriented towards a homogeneous society (Sandeep Kumar, 2004).

1.3 Assumption/Hypothesis

Culture influences the richness of activities and use of street space in the streets in India. Other influence might be the political, economic and demographic variables.

1.4 Research Questions

The key research question associated with the influence or culture on the use of street space, which relates to how the activities and the people's culture influence the character of the streets and the use of it? Thus, the following questions arise:

i. What is the local culture of the people?

ii. What are the activities or how is the use of street space?

1.5 Research Aim

The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of culture on the use of street space in three cities in Tamil Nadu, India: Chennai, Pondicherry, and Madurai, in order to develop critical thinking and discussion on the cultural diversity in urban design. It will provide indicators of the actual function of space which can be used as reference data for urban design, to be responsive in specific cultural context.

1.6 Research Objectives

1. To identify the activities associated with local culture.
2. To examine the character of activities and use of street space, and the influence of culture.

1.7 Scope of Research

The study is limited to the three parameters of influence of culture on the use of street space. The focus is mainly on the religion and beliefs, the economic culture, the lifestyle and behaviour. The concern is only in several studied context in Tamil Nadu, each having a strong identity: Chennai as a state capital city, Pondicherry as a former French colony, and

Madurai as a traditional temple city. This study is not intended to idealize or romanticize the Indian street as an ultimate answer to the future of street and urban design, but to learn from the different experience offered by the Indian street.

1.8 Research Gap

Only several aspects of culture are focused in this study, while some aspects are not discussed here. The use of street space is influenced by many aspects in culture, and also other parameters besides religion and beliefs, the economic culture, lifestyle and behaviour.

1.9 Research Methodology and Techniques

The analysis on culture and activities on the streets in India provide information on the diverse use of the Indian street, and the different aspects of culture that influence their uses. The theoretical background will be developed for the purpose of the study as to the method of observation and analysis. The observation was recorded by means of cultural parameters, indicating the categories of cultural influence (religion and beliefs, the economic culture, lifestyle and behaviour) to be observed during the three weeks field study in Tamil Nadu, India.

In order to acquire the primary relevant data for the purpose of the study, only observation of the street activities was conducted. Observations of actual use are important to answer questions about usage such as: who does what? Where? When? Including and excluding whom? and Why? (Rapoport, 1977).The field survey in India was conducted between September and October 2009. Due to time and other constraints, extensive detailed study cannot be carried out. For example the behavioral observation could be carried out during the different seasons but it was limited to three week's observation in several cities in India.

The key principle during the field study and the analysis that follows is to understand the social system, belief system of the studied context, in order to understand and comprehend their situation and behaviour from their stand and perspectives.

The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of culture on the use of street space in three cities in Tamil Nadu, India: Chennai, Pondicherry, and Madurai. Culture is the vital factor in determining how people will arrange themselves spatially for the purpose of living and interacting with one another.

Major steps involved in the study are:

a) Establishment of the local culture, human activity profile and the use of street space that occur on an average day.
b) Photographic and video recording of the behaviour events as well as and interviews along the street.
c) Qualitative analysis of recorded data.

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