

Beyond Narrative: Museum as Public Space in the Age of Neoliberalism

Noopur Desai

Abstract:

A museum is a public space and a site for spatial embodiment or the geographical location where public sphere emerges. The idea of museum making has become more complex with its reformulation as a result of economic transformation. In this paper, I examine the notion of public space in the context of contemporary art. Located in Dr. Bhau Daji Lad City Museum (BDL), I look at how this space is produced by neoliberal tendencies. Established in 1872, BDL houses colonial collections that defined the idea of heritage and nation but remained in wary conditions till the early 2000s. When other public art institutions displayed a lack of initiative to support contemporary art practice, BDL began to incorporate newer ways of exhibiting, installations by contemporary artists, educational initiatives, and public programmes since its restoration in 2009 with the help of INTACH and Bajaj Foundation. This got reflected in the building's refurbishments, improvement in the standards of museum facilities, new building extension, media coverage, and organisational changes. BDL has also become a site of contestation in the form of public-private partnership, engagement with cutting edge art practice, discursive relationships with different publics, privatising cultural practices, and formulation of public space. The paper will deliberate upon the position of the museum within the contemporary articulation of cultural capitalism specifically in the context of the post-industrial city of Mumbai.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Public Space, Contemporary Art, Museum, Public Private Partnership, Publics, Heritage, Curation, Edutainment, Participation, Place-making, Metropolis, Post-industrial city

Introduction

A museum creates a social or public space where it plays the role of a steward of a collection, a site for exhibition making and knowledge production, a space for informal learning, and also

functions as a project of city planning. It offers manifestations of cultural aspirations in the form of its collection being associated with different individuals as well as communities. Therefore, it needs to be cited as a public space for public address where the central concerns are its representation, history, collection, and display. The case study of Mumbai's Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, a city museum, is a significant example of how this space is being produced and constructed by neoliberal tendencies in the recent past. The paper analyses a select few exhibitions at the Museum that validate the shifts in the ideas of exhibition-making as well as its engagement with the public within the context of changing modes of contemporary art, heritage, and culture. It also questions the role of art making and heritage in the context of the idea of the creative city that has emerged as nomenclature of neoliberal city structures and processes of urbanisation.

Established in 1857 and opened to public in 1872, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad City Museum situated in Byculla holds a colonial collection that defined the idea of heritage and nation but remained in wary conditions till the early 2000s. Established as Victoria & Albert Museum, it was renamed in 1975 after Dr. Lad, a philanthropist, historian, and a surgeon who played a remarkable role in setting up the museum. Today, the Museum holds a large collection including miniature clay models, maps, lithographs, photographs, books, decorative objects, and natural history objects. The museum of colonial collection of objects has been transformed over the last decade with a renovation project, building expansions, and by entering into the arena of contemporary arts. The BDL Museum has incorporated newer ways of exhibiting works of contemporary artists, educational initiatives, and public programs since its restoration in 2009. This is reflected in the refurbishments, gallery displays, and improvement in the standards of museum facilities, and media coverage, and organisational changes. The tripartite understanding between the Mumbai municipal corporation, INTACH, and the Bajaj Foundation has led to a significant example of public private partnership in the field of arts, heritage, and museum making in recent times. The museum as a public space in neoliberal times embodies or represents the policies of cultural sphere which could be explored in the context of the discursive formulations of the notions of public and private and, therefore, the discussion here will be limited to matters surrounding the BDL Museum, its collections, newer ways of engaging with contemporary art, and the outcomes of public private partnerships.

In order to consider public space as a site of conception, production, and circulation of contemporary arts, it becomes imperative to think about the historical as well as spatial configurations that are determinants of the site. It becomes crucial, therefore, to examine the

recoding of the public spaces in a city like Mumbai as a result of these processes and consequently, what changes have occurred in the production and public circulation of contemporary art as well as heritage production. Museum becomes a site for creation and promotion of public discourses and, hence, functions as a space for the public sphere around ideas of culture, heritage, and art practice. This forces one not to look at the urban space as a symbol of progress and modernisation, but rather as a site of negotiations with differences and encounters with the other. One such example is BDL Museum's collaboration with ZegnArt Public, an art foundation from Italy. The project produced Reena Kallat's public artwork, *Untitled (Cobwebs/Crossing)* which highlighted the relationship between public space and the city's history. In *Untitled (Cobweb/Crossings)*, an oversized web made with hundreds of rubber stamp replicas wove a history of the city onto the façade of the Museum, with each stamp bearing a colonial street name that has been replaced by an indigenous one. By recovering the memory of one aspect of the process of decolonisation – renaming of anglicised British street names with Indian or regional ones – it forms a palimpsest on to which generations re-inscribe stories. “A cobweb is evocative of time,” explains Reena Kallat, “and just as a room is left vacant, stories that are not visited gather cobwebs that appear to hold dust from the past.” (Canziani and Menegoi 2014: 16) All this brings in a new cosmopolitan receptivity to the museum which had otherwise become a dusty relic of colonial rule. It is this new context of public culture that is transforming the museum-going experience for the audience within a new context of post-liberalisation transformations in the city and its spaces.

The Neoliberal Turn

Neoliberalism has become the central guiding principle today that determines political and economic thought which reflects on other aspects of social, cultural, and artistic practices.

The ideological position of neoliberal thought proposes that “human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey 2005: 2) The process, certainly, entails deregulation, privatisation, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision as it becomes a dominant conceptual apparatus that shapes contemporary ideas of freedom, desires, and aspirations. As Turan argues, the public space in cities becomes a focal point for economic transformations and cultural activity in terms of privatisation, internal reorganisation, and new institutional arrangements. With the retreat of

public authorities in welfare provision, private actors have noticed the potential in public spaces like museums that contribute to preserving and activating these spaces in a certain way. The porous boundaries between the state and corporate entities and their roles reconfigure these institutional practices reflected in the cultural sector. (Turan 2015). In India, it has percolated in art and culture organisations through the initiation of public private partnerships that rejuvenated spaces such as public museums. As arts and culture become commodifiable and valuable concepts, cultural specificities are considered economic assets that employ strategies of urban re-branding for place distinctiveness (Gotham 2007) According to Kratz and Karp, the globalising processes impact museum and heritage practice where museum-generated social processes and globalising processes intersect and interact while creating “museum frictions” within the space that incorporates “the idea of the museum as a varied and often changing set of practices, processes, and interactions.” (Kratz and Karp 2006: 2) They claim that the museums have become portable social technology, a set of museological processes through which claims of history, identity and values are represented, embodied and discussed. (Kratz and Karp 2006: 4) As a result, international connections and global orientation have been playing a crucial role in shaping the museum practice in recent years.

As a result of these processes, museums have begun to remodel themselves where various tensions emerge and negotiations take place while linking many local and global elements like regional, international and community-based projects. It becomes imperative to understand how the Museum reflects the local and global art and heritage discourse and creative economy that govern the space. Hence, I would like to argue here that the politics of public space in the context of BDL Museum exposes the contradictions of neoliberal globalism at various levels. Neoliberalism is an economic system that is developed under specific social conditions where competition becomes the essential force for progress and growth, and the proscription of public (read State here) interference with market forces. The process of economic liberalisation has privatised collectively or used state-run resources. It includes cutting of public funding for social services especially culture, encouragement to privatisation or partnerships for efficiency, emphasis on individual choices for consumption patterns and entrepreneurial initiatives. In recent years, the BDL Museum has been planned as a new creative area by conserving and renovating the old buildings and extending it to other parts. The Museum is circumscribed within the neoliberal landscape of the urban landscape of Mumbai where culture is being co-opted and reshaped and public space is being negotiated and constructed through processes of museum making, art discourse, display, collaborative actions and partnerships. The Museum, now a part of the Google Culture project, offers its collection on the online platform accessed

publicly all over the world. It is an illustrious model of creative city discourse made by state as well as private intervention and is taken over by the global capital with the intention to transform the cultural domain. Conversely, it remains an alternative space for cultural production which does not fall directly under the purview of corporate control or profit-making policies and does have to face economic marginalisation from the state. While commenting on the contemporary museum scene in India and the process of revitalisation of the cultural sector, the managing director of the BDL Museum Tasneem Mehta points out,

First and foremost, you make the institutions autonomous. Second, you invite experts to be on the board and you invite public-private partnerships. You bring in not just people with expertise, you bring in people with business acumen because in the end, what I do at BDL is almost entrepreneurial. We are still selling a product. We are selling the idea of India's heritage, we are selling the idea of India's art and that is what the art fair is doing too. It is a marketing exercise. At the same time, a lot of education happens to get people to understand the arts.

(Khurana 2016)

Originally, the museum has been an agent for the inscription of the universalising ideology of modernity as well as of imperial hierarchies of Western nations and world cultures, though it mounts exhibitions of contemporary art which are normally beyond their scope. The main museum space retains the grandeur of Victorian architecture while the newly developed special projects space resembles the contemporary white cube space. The space was originally used as workshops for model-making and production of replicas and figurines that are now displayed in the dioramas inside the museum. The museum plaza offers an open space for interactions, conversations, workshops, and other activities.¹ The newly developed constituencies of audiences and/or participants have constituted a new set of demands from the publics as well as the Museum. If we consider museum as a process of “placing public space within a disciplinary model of space [that] demonstrates how public space can function as a site for the surveillance of, and a stage for, public discourse” (Barrett, 2012), then, it is crucial to see how we understand the creation of contemporary art discourse in context of BDL's contemporary art exhibitions situated within its colonial collection. To take this point forward, I would like to discuss a couple of recent exhibitions curated and organised by the museum team in collaboration with other organisations or individuals.

¹ Interview with Himanshu Kadam, Assistant Curator, Special exhibitions program at Dr. Bhanu Daji Lad Museum in November 2016.

Capitalising (on) culture: Effects of Museum Making

By introducing newer ways of museum making, the spatial organisation of the museum dioramas and display is interspersed with contemporary art installations and objects. These insertions by contemporary artists come as a response to the museum's collection and are embedded within the larger framework of the museum display with subtle disruptions. One such display, *Woven Wonders of Varanasi*², created a visual dislocation within the space with its extravagant colours, textures, and display that belittles and ensconces the museum objects. Organised in 2015, *Woven Wonders of Varanasi* was an exhibition on the revival of Indian textiles organised in collaboration with the Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, and Lakme Fashion week³ organized by Lakme, a cosmetic and beauty service brand in collaboration with IMG Reliance Pvt. Ltd, a venture to develop sports and media properties. As described in the catalogue of the exhibition and on the Museum website, the goal of the exhibition was conceived as a process of “bridging contemporary design and traditional craft, the exhibition aims to display the country’s textile tradition to a national and global audience, thereby providing a platform to showcase the best of India’s designers, weavers, and textile workers and to encourage the Make In India Initiative.” (November 28, 2016) As one would witness during the exhibition, the Museum did not offer any information about the artists, artisans, designers, weavers, as against its postulation during conception of the programme. The exhibition organised under *Engaging Traditions* was curated by Shaina N.C., a designer as well as a BJP leader from South Mumbai was included in the Make In India project conceived by the present Central Government. Prabir Purkayastha problematises the position of the Make In India initiative by understanding it in the historical context of India's policy of self-reliance which believed in the process of investment in its people through transfer of knowledge and technical capacities. According to him, Make In India is based on vacuous slogans which would lead to simply “handing over labour, land, and the Indian market to foreign capital.” (Purkayastha, 2016)

Though it is crucial to create avenues for production and circulation of these weavers with the

² “Woven Wonders of Varanasi” was curated as part of the series of exhibitions titled “Engaging Traditions” curated by Tasneem Mehta Zakaria. This series invites contemporary artists to engage with the museum collection, its history, and archive to intervene and produce contemporary art works situated within the context the museum's permanent collection.

³ March earlier that year Lakme Fashion Week's finale was shifted elsewhere (Palladium Hotel) after a protest by Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, a regional political party espouses parochialism and chauvinism, as they were against any kind of “commercial activity” in the premises of the museum which is a public institution that represents the people of the city of Mumbai.

idea of bridging the gap between the craftsmen and designers, is also important to study and investigate what happens in the process. The display of dazzling designs, colourful textiles, and garments created a spectacle for the viewers with a glimpse of heritage and culture. In the process of commodification of heritage by the neoliberal forces, heritage is actively used to increase the marketability of places, institutions and destinations concerned. While defining his notion of “sentimental capitalism”, Da Costa elaborates on “marketisation of cultural production as means of artisanal development and heritage protection” in city spaces. (Da Costa 2015: 88-89) She argues that in post-industrial formations of Indian cities, artistic production is organised for development while revalorising degraded land and space to reconstruct the city, and using it for process of place-making through sentiments of hope and nostalgia. (Da Costa 2015: 88-89) It is also important to see how the creative economy discourse is mobilised in the context of the metropolis of Mumbai. Creative economy indicates any form of cultural production that involves human creativity and intellectual property of individuals or groups that contributes to overall development. Pointing out fallacies of creative economy discourse, Da Costa takes a cultural politics approach to deliberate upon the complex interlinkage between cultural production and development planning in the city context. (Da Costa 2015: 75) It becomes a site of contestation where meaning-making and place-making take place through powerful discourses, speculations, and cultural production. These kinds of artistic productions become a resource where artists are conceived as service providers who create cultural capital through their projects which is made available to the communities (Yudice 2004: 332). Focusing on cultural activities and production as a primary factor, cultural capital creates consumption opportunities, and commodification of cultural elements (Žižek 2009). The communities can yield value for cultural institutions through various such activities where aesthetic practices are mobilised to promote heritage industries as culture has become a valuable resource to be invested in.

As Miwon Kwon observes,

While such an outlook contributes to some expansion of art audiences, strengthening the tie between elite cultural institutions and local constituencies normally disengaged from their activities, its effects also include the reification, and colonisation of marginal, disenfranchised social groups, as well as the concomitant reification and commodification of local cultures.
(Kwon 2002: 153)

Apart from the capitalising the heritage and culture under neoliberal structures, it is also crucial to problematise the idea of social practice in the context of museum making, and as part of our

discussion on public space. Here, I would like to discuss the BMW Guggenheim Lab that was organised in partnership with the BDL Museum in Mumbai in 2012-2013, one of the nine cities of the then planned Lab project. Though the project was conceived for nine cities across the world, it was closed down after three cities, New York, Berlin, and Mumbai. The entire project was funded by the BMW foundation and was aimed to re-look at the issues of metropolitan cities and urban planning. The project was conceived as an extension of the German car company's investment in R&D on the future of mobility and transport in metropolitan cities as part of their production and marketing strategies. The Lab had to face deep scepticism in Berlin where community groups and radical activists made the Lab withdraw from a proposed site which was on the front lines of gentrification. It eventually found a home in an upmarket Berlin neighbourhood but, under ensuing stress from corporate sponsors. (Holleran and Holleran 2015)

Situated within the original plan, the Lab was built in collaboration with the BDL Museum in Mumbai while achieving the multi-pronged motive, locating it within the old mill area, connecting with a museum space as a space representing the identity of the city, addressing the issues of urbanity in an upcoming area like Byculla, engaging with the multifarious histories of workers struggles, cultural movements, linguistic identities. Though designed to create an interface between cities, urban issues, and citizens, the Lab – as a social practice project, and design-based intervention – had very limited interface with the communities, and urban contexts that they claimed they wished to change. The museum moved out of its space to its neighbourhood and aspired for an in-depth engagement with its communities. The community became a site for experimentation; the neighbourhood became a lab where the urban interventions and experiments took place in order to find solutions to the problems of urban planning. Projects such as *Mapping Privacy* in public space or testing (*Testing! Testing!*) the effects of the city on the human brain and psychology were to gather evidence about the transforming city, its policies, and their viability. Developed by psychologist Colin Ellard, this project gathered data “which would then be available for application within urban planning and design to enhance urban comfort, increase functionality, and keep city dwellers' stress to acceptance level.”(BWM Guggenheim Lab Website 2012) These labs were pop-up museums, exhibitions or projects which did not intend to engage with the neighbourhood or communities on a long-term basis. On the contrary, it neutralised the radical elements and aspects of class struggle, labour, and protest. In the process, it became a site of cultural production that is to be viewed and reviewed with hardly any engagement with the workers, unions in the conception of the museum. As Miwon Kwon argues, “the community artist may legitimate the presumption that the cause of social problems rests with spirituality and culturally deprived individuals rather than with the systemic or

structural conditions of capitalist labour markets, stratified social hierarchy, and uneven distribution of wealth and resources.” (Kwon 2002: 143) Therefore, it becomes pertinent to discern the ways in which they argue to create alternative spaces for certain communities through these interventions or what happens to the spatial dimensions of these communities after the lab is moved away.

Moving Away from Dioramas: Educational Initiatives at the Museum

Though the spatial aspects of the museum, its display strategies, and diorama designs do impact the construction of the space and viewing possibilities, the process of museum making goes beyond those strategies and structures today. The creation of narratives through displays and exhibitions are balanced with other activities and spatial qualities. The geographical and cultural location of the museum plays a crucial role as well. The location of the BDL museum in the central neighbourhood of Byculla can be situated within the process of gentrification in the city where policies and patterns of reinvestment and development of an urban space would open it to a more affluent class. Byculla has become a new hotspot for real estate developers who plan to build theme-based gated community buildings which will replace the mill workers' quarters, low-rise buildings, and small commercial units in the area. There seems to be a shift in perspective of the Museum's focus and services where, along with meeting the needs of city residents, the Museum also aspires to help create a marketable place for outsiders in the neighbourhood. The museum is conceived here, not only, as a site for education, entertainment but also for tourism and part of a global art circuit by the means of various cultural productions including exhibitions, seminars, talks, courses, and workshops.

The Museum has also shifted from their earlier static task of accumulation of objects to more active ways of meaning making, knowledge construction and audience participation. In the real post-museum spirit (Hooper-Greenhill 2000), the museum ventures into different cultural activities; from performances, film screenings, workshops, walk-throughs, one-day curator initiative, art criticism courses to hosting birthday parties and get-togethers which have helped them engage with different kinds of audiences in ways that are contact zones. (Clifford 1999) One could notice that the museum has departed from management of historical objects to

edutainment⁴ and public awareness and has allowed people's participation (in a limited sense) in the physical and intellectual making of the museum. Though the museum endeavours to incorporate various cultural practices (*Wonders of Varanasi*) or movements, and politics of resistance (*Social Fabric*⁵), they enact the politics of neoliberal capitalism by making use of the politics of resistance, ideas of civic engagement, and privatising public space through collaborations with Lakme Fashion week, and hosting receptions and exhibition openings in conjunction with the private galleries that support and fund these shows. For example, the exhibition *Social Fabric* dealt with the impact of textile trade, closing down of mills on local communities, without building any relationship with the community where they could have had a stake in telling their tale. In that process, the museum incorporates these paradoxes into the very design of the display and the actual politics of incorporation and participation gets obscured.

Besides that, the previews of contemporary art exhibitions are generally organised for select audience including contemporary artists, donors, collectors, and critics. There are “private tours” at higher charges organised by the museum for specific groups as against their weekly walk-throughs which are open to public. The question here is what does this kind of segregation lead to? Does it create private spaces or zones within the public space of the museum, does the space remain completely “public”? Who organises this space and how? How does that help us revamp the idea of museum as a public space in contemporary times? The questions are at multiple levels. But it is important to understand how the notions of participation and civic engagement are produced, organised, and restricted within the museum context today where the museum visitor is considered as a consumer who is imagined to be seeking maximum satisfaction in exchange of their time and money. While discussing how art museum education supports neoliberal discourses, Rina Kundu and Nadin Kalin (2015) argue in their critical essay, *Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum*, that the museum education and its methodologies reinforce neoliberal logics, and in a way, conceal the contradictions of neoliberal policies. The individuals are supposed to be making their own choices in these situations while reducing the need of the state to be responsible for the vulnerable and the marginalised. The museum becomes a site for creative capital which uses cultural knowledge and intellectual property to

⁴ Rina Kundu and Nadin Calin use the term “edutainment” in their article *Participating in the Neoliberal Art Museum*, *Studies in Art Education* where they address the shift in educational programs of the museums towards entertainment activities to incorporate wider audiences.

⁵ *Social Fabric*, an exhibition curated and organised in 2012, examined the impact of global textile trade on local communities and the rise and fall of Mumbai's textile industry. The artists included Sudhir Patwardhan, Archana Hande (India), Alice Creischer (Germany) and Celine Condorelli (UK).

produce products and services for cultural consumers which has certain cultural value and meaning. The visitors participate actively in various activities, by leaving their suggestions and comments in the scrap-book, by directly communicating with the museum staff while viewing the museum collection and exhibitions. Cultural consumption, therefore, becomes a form of investment within the format of the changed relationship between the museum and its public. One can find diverse representation of audiences, as I have mentioned above, that participates in the museum making and programming but nonetheless, knowledge and regulation continue to be in the hands of the Museum.

In conclusion, I would like to say that these programmes conjure up museum experience and economy created around it that demystifies the consumption of culture in the museum context through intersections between entertainment, interactions, and social exchange. (Pine and Gilmore 1998) With an emphasis on the management of audience experience and individualised experience that connects them to the space and objects in a sustained fashion, the structure of the Museum and its staff create an interface with the audience in a more public-oriented manner. They are differentiated into categories in order to serve and measure its tangible and/or intangible outcomes which give rise to a subtle tension between the museum and its audience, curator/organiser and participant, production and consumption. With the lessening of state's role in funding and supporting art and culture sector, the public private partnership began as a coping mechanism in case of Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, although it has proselyted the role of private entities in the shaping of contemporary art and exhibition making discourse. It entails a particular kind of engagement and displaces other modes of participation while validating the consideration that the public space of museum is being conflated with neoliberal logics in the disguise of participation, citizenship, and inclusion.

Noopur Desai is an art writer and researcher based in Pune. Currently, she is a PhD scholar at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Noopur received the FICA Ila Dalmia research grant 2015 for her project 'Formulating Dialogical Art: An Archival Project of Public Art Interventions'. She is the co-editor of the bilingual online journal, Hakara (hakara.in).

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