

The Absurd Self and The Naked City:

An Existential Re-vision of Sustainable Urbanism

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It's absurd means "It's impossible" but also "It's contradictory." If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. But it is so solely by virtue of the disproportion between his intention and the reality he will encounter, of the contradiction I notice between his true strength and the aim he has in view. . . The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation.¹

A step lower and strangeness creeps in: perceiving that the world is "dense," sensing to what a degree a stone is foreign and irreducible to us, with what intensity nature or a landscape can negate us. At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than the lost paradise. . . The world evades us because it becomes itself again. . . . It withdraws at a distance from us. Just as there are days when under the familiar face of a woman, we see as a stranger her we had loved months or years ago, perhaps we shall come even to desire what suddenly leaves us so alone. . . . Just one thing: that denseness and that strangeness of the world is the absurd.²

— Albert Camus

Prologue

This essay stems from the proposition that the problems of the world stem fundamentally from the (existential) problems of self. Contrary to the conventional belief that sustainability is a marginal and physical-environmental issue in our societies, I propose that—through a significant redefinition of the idea—sustainability is a central existential problem that affects everything between self and city.

Over three decades ago, Gregory Bateson articulated a discourse about what he called "ecology of mind."³ Much of present-day discourse about city and sustainability is exclusive or focused solely on the physical or formal aspects of societal change and much of it ignores the essentiality of nourishing an ecology of mind. I will consider here an existential psychoanalytical approach to sustainability and urbanism that is more inclusive and holistic. The 5000 year old Indian city of Banaras will be used as a case to illustrate this existential discourse of urbanism and sustainability.

Three kinds of sustainability

Sustainability is not merely an environmental problem that resides "out there." Sustainability is not just a "green" problem, but also a problem of existential "blues." Fundamentally, an intrinsic and existential problem is projected onto the physical environment. In an effort to generate a framework for understanding these problems, I propose a sustainable trinity:

1. **Physical sustainability:**

The problems of natural resources, life cycles, energy efficiency, renewable energy, environmental pollution, etc. come under this category. Technological and scientific advancements and understanding are crucial to operate at this level of sustainability.

2. **Institutional and Cultural Sustainability:**

The realms of political, economic, linguistic, sociological and cultural issues are a concern at this level. Through institutions, we environmentalize and systematize our actions and ideologies. Only human species have an elaborate, varied and complex political, social, economic, cultural and linguistic “environment” that directly affects the physical environment. Dogs and cats do not build parliaments, nuclear bombs, libraries, opera houses and stock exchanges; only humans do.

3. **Spiritual Sustainability:**

I use the word *spiritual* as an umbrella concept to encompass existential, psychological, metaphysical, epistemological and other highly ethereal, yet very real aspects of human existence. These issues are timeless and intrinsic to being human. Any discourse that does not address the *spiritual* issues—as understood here—is incomplete, inadequate and conditional.

Majority of today's work on sustainability and city deals only with the first kind of sustainability, physical sustainability. Renowned psychologist R.D. Laing expresses his anguish about the paucity of emphasis on the spiritual aspects of our world:

We are a generation of men so estranged from the inner world that many are arguing that it does not exist; and that even if it does exist, it does not matter . . . Quantify the heart's agony and ecstasy in a world in which when the inner world is first discovered, we are liable to find ourselves bereft and derelict. For without the inner the outer loses its meaning, and without the outer the inner loses its substance.⁴

A comprehensive understanding of the dynamics between these three levels of sustainability—from the viewpoint of our psychological existence—is essential to a successful understanding of human condition and urban crises. As Erich Fromm told us, "even the most complete satisfaction of all his instinctive needs does not solve his human problem; his most intensive passions and needs are not those rooted in the body, but those rooted in the very peculiarity of his existence."⁵

Self and its Discontents: The Necessity of an Existential Discourse of Sustainability

Problems of the world, including the environmental threats, in essence, stem from the problems of self—both individual and collective self. The Problem of sustainability of human world is predicated on the problem of sustainability of self.

Problems of the world are problems of billions of people like you and me. All of their problems. Our existential composition distinguishes us from other species and makes the issue of sustainability more than technological or physical problem. Erich Fromm, one of the most brilliant commentators on the human condition writes about the fundamental schism in the human heart:

Self-awareness, reason, and imagination have disrupted the 'harmony' which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part . . . Being aware of himself, he realizes his powerlessness and the limitations of his existence. He visualizes his own end: death. Never is he free from the dichotomy of his existence . . .

Further, he says:

This split in man's nature leads to dichotomies, which I call existential because they are rooted in the very existence of man; they are contradictions, which man cannot annul but to which he can react in various ways, relative to his character and his culture.⁷

Fromm's comments effectively sum up what we wake up to every morning and what we sleep with every night, and everything that happens in between. For Jean-Paul Sartre, human existence is *nauseating alienation*; for Kierkegaard it is *angst*; for Albert Camus it is *absurdity*.

Out of the *angst*, the *nauseating alienation* and the *absurdity* of existence arise our problems and conflicts. Individual insecurities and irresolution add up to racial, national and civilizational unrest, the results of which are all too familiar to us in the form of wars, genocide, crimes, immoralities, and other forms of human madness.

These dilemmas are what we are *born with*. The world with its culture, its opportunities, its complexities and provisions, is the environment we are *born into*. Our life unfolds in the process of reconciling the existential and environmental conditions. As long as there is an existential irresolution, humankind is going to be fundamentally unsustainable. Thus, sustainability is primarily an existential problem.

Physical sustainability initiatives strive to alter the physical or socio-political environment to reestablish an ecological equilibrium without reestablishing the equilibrium of existential ecology. As Erich Fromm says, "Man can react to historical contradictions by annulling them through his own action; but he cannot annul existential dichotomies, although he can react to them in different ways."⁸ Psychologist Rollo May concurs: "The only way we can understand and deal with human beings is to clarify the—'nature of being human'—which is ontology. Any theory not founded on the nature of being human is a lie and betrayal of man."⁹ Nobel laureate Albert Camus muses that "whether the earth or sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions."¹⁰ In modern societies, we are overtly concerned with "essences" to the extent of excluding any discourse about "existence." As Rollo May observes:

Traditionally, in Western culture, *existence* has been set over against *essence*, the latter being the emphasis upon immutable principles, truth, logical laws, and so forth, that are assumed to stand above and beyond any given *existence*. In endeavoring to separate reality into its discrete parts and to formulate abstract laws for these parts, Western science has by and large been *essentialist* in character . . . It was against Hegel [and Hegelian panrationalism] that Kierkegaard, and later Nietzsche and [Henry] James, revolted so strenuously.¹¹

Architectural and urban discourses that do not address and operate at all these levels of sustainability and help us deal with our existential schisms, cannot be fully termed valid, comprehensive or sustainable.

Absurdity, Alienation and the Modern Self

As Nietzsche pronounced, God is dead. He is dead along with the death of metanarratives. But death becomes alive and life for the modern human ends with death. All that a person builds his or her entire life comes to an abrupt end and that is irresolvably meaningless. From this condition arises our uncaring attitude toward our future generations as we cannot view life as a continuum that extends beyond one's physical existence. As Camus' Caligula in *Caligula and other plays* muses: "Men die; and they are not happy."¹² Erich Fromm notes, "The most fundamental existential dichotomy is that between life and death. The fact that we have to die is unalterable for man. Man is aware of this fact, and this very awareness profoundly influences his life . . . All knowledge about death does not alter the fact that death

is not a meaningful part of life and that there is nothing for us to do but to accept the fact of death; hence, as far as our life is concerned, defeat."¹³ Sustainability has *become* necessary because the self itself has become *absurd* and unsustainable. Maurice Friedeman concurs: "The 'death of God' means the alienation of modern man, as Albert Camus has tirelessly pointed out in his discussion of the 'absurd'."¹⁴ Modern self is volatile, uncontainable, unstable, amorphous and full of irreconcilable disparities. Modern human being is, thus, existentially unsustainable.

This absurdity and sense of alienation are reflected in the epistemology and existence of present-day architecture and urbanism. *Alienation* is the common theme of majority of today's architecture and urbanism. What is easy to part with? That which you love or that which you do not care about? Obviously, it is the latter. It is easier to part with architecture and infrastructure that does not mean much to us. So, we produce architecture—of strip malls, kitschy commercial buildings, ugliest warehouses, etc.—that no body can relate to or cares much. We have cities that no body cares much. We have a world that no body cares much. The world that nobody cares is simply unsustainable. We live in a world that 'doesn't matter' where sustainability becomes a difficult proposition. Thus, we alienate each other and our environment is equally alienating. Our cities are built today for strangers by strangers. We are all "strangers" in our cities of alienation. In our cities, everyone is "comfortable" but nobody is at home. *We don't "live" in our cities anymore; we "use" them.* Jan, the character in Albert Camus' play "*The Misunderstanding*" quips that "no one can be happy in exile or estrangement. One can't remain a stranger all one's life. It is quite true that a man needs happiness, but he also needs to find his true place in the world." A place is a set of sustainable relationships—meaningful relationships. Alienation rejects any kind of sensible and profound relationships that are necessary to 'find one's true place in the world'. Thus, we are going through an individual and collective alienation, rootlessness and civilizational neurosis, of which our chaotic cities and meaningless architecture are toxic by-products.

The Epistemological Crisis of Self and Architecture

The most fundamental existential dichotomy is that between life and death. The fact that we have to die is unalterable for man. Man is aware of this fact, and this very awareness profoundly influences his life All knowledge about death does not alter the fact that death is not a meaningful part of life and that there is nothing for us to do but to accept the fact of death; hence, as far as our life is concerned, defeat.¹⁵

— Erich Fromm

As Daniel Bell pointed out in his remarkable sociological work *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, religion was a legitimizing and binding thread of —what he called—three components of society: *culture*, *techno-economy*, and *polity*. With the advent of science, the legitimacy of religion was thrown out. Along with the bath water of religion, everything else that was connected to it was also thrown out. The breakdown of the integrity and the unity of society also meant a breakdown of the unity of self. The mechanisms of continuation of life in the form of familial institutions, mythologies of life after death and emancipation of life through death, and other means have collapsed with the breakdown of what held it all together. This collapse meant that the existential schisms of human being would break loose with all of their power, contradictions and absurdity. Meaning of life was left to individuals to figure out through their own life work. The institutions for sustaining individual and collective existence have crumbled. Meaning of one's life is no more culturally handed down or validated. Meaning of life depends not on collective institutions and urban structures. So, the city as a spatial and institutional domain of definition and concretization of meaning of life has been rendered marginal and utilitarian. Self, with all its existential contradictions, endless desires and powerful inner impulses was unleashed on to the world. Modern human is born incomplete into a "use-and-throw" consumerist institutional framework that is unsustainable and unsustaining.

For modern human, life is a double bind, an impossibility and a paradox that meaninglessly ends with death. Modern human being's actions are directed toward incessantly amassing knowledge, memories, actions, wealth and fame that, they hope, would validate the meaning of existence. Like Kafka's Joseph K., every second of our life is consumed by our necessity to justify and prove our existence. We feel we are guilty of living until proven otherwise. Everyone of us is familiar with that feeling of guilt when we do nothing on a certain day and feel that we have committed a cardinal sin. *Time has become such a precious, unsustainable and rare commodity in modern societies precisely because we do not have enough time to complete our life work and discover the meaning of our life. Speed, a consequence of absurd time is one of the primary determinants and destroyers of our cities.*

Elucidating these issues from another angle, Jean-François Lyotard, in his seminal post-structural epistemological work The Postmodern Condition, traces the schism of human world in the changing nature of knowledge in industrial and postindustrial societies.

Lyotard observes that traditional cultures were characterized by the cultural cohesion brought about by, what he calls, *narrative knowledge*. Mythologies, folklore, legends, stories and tales constitute the body of narrative knowledge. In those pre-scientific cultures, mythologies and other narratives that explained the purpose and destiny of life formed the outermost layer that lies beyond the notions of proof and evidence. Every other kind of knowledge remained within the purview of those *metanarratives*. *Epics* are good examples of metanarratives. *The Holy Bible* for the Christian world, *The Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* for the Hindu world, and *The Torah* for the Jewish world are all examples of metanarratives. The knowledge contained in these sacred books dictated the right, the wrong, the ideal and the meaning of life. Narratives provided metaphors necessary for living. This knowledge was both concretized and reinforced through architecture and urbanism of those times.

Lyotard argues that the spell of metanarratives broke down with the advent of industrial revolution and the grip of grand narratives loosened with the advent of information revolution. Scientific knowledge became a distinct body of knowledge in itself and began challenging narrative forms of knowledge in its zeal to *explain* (as opposed to *experience*) life and universe. Lyotard writes that "In the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity." Further, he says, "I do not mean to say that narrative knowledge can prevail over science, but its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality next to which contemporary scientific knowledge cuts a poor figure."¹⁶

The crux of this argument is that scientific knowledge, which is based on *evidence, proof, and legalities* deals only with the verifiable workings and facts of the universe such as *efficiency, function and optimization*. Scientific forms of knowledge do not deal with such issues as *justice, morality, compassion, beauty, love, meaning* and a myriad other non-material and intangible human attributes. As Lyotard rightly points out, both kinds of knowledge are equally necessary for us to live, but the problem begins when scientific or technological knowledge begins to enter the game of rejecting narrative knowledge in an effort to legitimize itself as the only valid form of knowledge. Scientific forms of knowledge help us understand the physical sustainability dynamics, while narrative forms of knowledge help us grapple with attaining institutional and spiritual levels of sustainability. We live at a time of fragmentation of narrative forms of knowledge. Where there is no narrative, there is no ideology. Where there is no ideology, there is no direction or clarity of purpose. The breakdown of grand narratives in the postmodern world means that there is no single body of knowledge beyond one's self that legitimizes and unifies the rest of human knowledge or the validity of human existence.

An epistemology based on narrative forms of knowledge is crucial to the sustenance of the societal sanity and a sustainable worldview. As Claude Levi-Strauss and Joseph Campbell have

eloquently pointed out in various works, mythologies play a significant role in forging a meaningful worldview. In such a narrative-less environment, things become a set of disparate, inanimate and lifeless commodities. Rivers become “resources” that “supply” us water and “carry” the industrial waste. Streets become roads that “expand” to accommodate “growing traffic.” Sun becomes an “energy source” that gives us “daylight” and “solar energy.” Our worldview has become utilitarian, prosaic, performative, barren and alienating. For us, the universe is dead matter. Therefore, from this limited view of life, we think that we are alone in the universe and keep wondering if there is any ‘life’ out there. Likewise, we have come to see our cities as dead and lifeless bunch of functional objects in the absence of philosophical, poetic and existential narratives. It is tough, if not impossible to “respect” and “care” for something that we cannot relate to as a living being or as an integral part of our psychological existence.

The most important development that Lyotard points out pertains to the loss of meaning in the postmodern world: "Lamenting the loss of meaning in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative."¹⁷ Scientific knowledge is incapable of addressing existential dilemmas. As an extension, architectural and urban development initiatives predicated *centrally* on scientific, performative, functional and infrastructural criteria are also incapable of addressing our existential agonies. Lyotard's model of knowledge has wide-ranging epistemological implications for sustainability, architecture and urbanism.

Architecture and urbanism, in the face of these existential and epistemological changes, have abandoned their responsibilities and chosen to become mere infrastructure that is of no socio-political or spiritual consequence. Most of architecture and urbanism today ignore what Erich Fromm so brilliantly voiced: "Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape. He cannot go back to the prehuman state of harmony with nature; he must proceed to develop his reason until he becomes the master of nature, and of himself."¹⁸ The epistemological and existential blankness of most of our cities and their opacity to reflect the existential dilemmas of human beings renders modern societies unsustainable. If and only if we begin to make the existential issues a central agenda for architecture and urbanism can we hope to be on the road toward a sustainable society. Existential and cultural sustainability precedes, frames and envelops physical sustainability.

Homo Infrastructurale: The Rise of the Infrastructure Society and The Fall of Architecture

Sing a song
or
Laugh
or
Cry
or
Go away.

- "*Please*" by Nanao Sasaki¹⁹

The spiritual degeneration of our cities is analogous to the spiritual deterioration of architecture. The transformations and transmutations that architecture went through in the last two centuries also affected the structure, form, function, meaning and substance of our cities. If we examine architecture today from an existential viewpoint and architecture's subversion into a functional subservience, we can understand the state of our cities today.

It would be no exaggeration to say that we do not make architecture anymore. Architecture is

something of an exception today. The capitalistic appropriation of the modernist functional metaphysics led to a degenerative undercurrent that swept away and eroded the existential substance and potential of architecture. Architecture has been replaced by infrastructure.²⁰ The schism between scientific and narrative forms of knowledge and the resultant delegitimation of narrative knowledge also led to a subversion and *infrastructuralization* of architecture. The rise of scientific knowledge as a legitimizing knowledge fostered an epistemological environment of *functional values* and *performatory goals*. As Lyotard says, machines and infrastructure "follow a principle, and it is the principle of optimal performance: maximizing output (the information or modifications obtained) and minimizing input (the energy expended in the process). Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, or the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical 'move' is 'good' when it does better and/or expends less energy than another."²¹

The reduction of architecture to infrastructure and the reduction of its existential and epistemological role to that of a functional and instrumental subservience has been the most lamentable architectural development of this century. *Therein lies the crisis of sustainability of architecture and city.*

Architecture and technology have a non-reciprocal relationship. All that is architectural is made possible by some form of technology, but not all that is technological is architecture. Every human-made thing involves technology. However, not everything technological is architecture. The bridges across the river in your city, the coffeemaker in your office, the powerhouse down the river are not architecture. They are machines and infrastructure. Architecture is always larger than itself and its functionality, whereas, infrastructure is about itself and its specific functionality.

Architecture stands in a different relationship to us. Architecture is what we dwell in. We expand the envelopes of our body and psyche through architecture. Architecture has this crucial psychological responsibility. Architecture may contain infrastructure but architecture is in itself not reducible to infrastructure. As Christian Norberg-Schulz eloquently pointed out in many of his works, architecture provides an existential foothold. Architecture, if it is to be called that, has to be aware of its humanistic, existential and social basis. In fact, we need to transform infrastructure into architecture and not the other way around. The crime passed on to us, as architecture and urban development today, is mostly nothing more than meaningless and glorified infrastructure. The perceptual and relational poverty of *homo infrastructuralis* was brilliantly captured by Jean-Paul Sartre. In *La Nausée*, Sartre's hero Antoine Roquentin muses:

Objects ought not to move one, since they are not alive. They should be used and put back in their place; one lives among them, they are useful and that is all. But I am moved by them, it is unbearable. I am as frightened of coming in contact with them as if they were live beasts.²²

This Sartrean muse also reminds me of Le Corbusier's masterly observation:

You employ stone, wood and concrete, and with these materials you build houses and palaces; that is construction. Ingenuity is at work. But suddenly you touch my heart, you do me good, I am happy and I say: "This is beautiful." That is Architecture. . . . By the use of inert materials and starting from conditions more or less utilitarian, you have established certain relationships which have aroused my emotions. This is Architecture.²³

Sustainable architecture is architecture with greater responsibility without losing sight of its fundamental responsibilities. The complex nature of architecture comes out when we think analogically: Why do we never talk of sustainable music or sustainable art or sustainable films? There is music that has sustained itself for centuries and so is there art that has sustained itself over millennia. There is literature that we hold sacred from generation to generation. There are films that would live with us as long as we do. *Such sustainability is achieved not because they are about the environment or ecology, but because they are about the human condition.* They are about the complexities, paradoxes and vagaries of human existence. Architecture becomes meaningful and sustainable when it does a *Casa Blanca* or a *Rashomon* or a *Schindler's List*. Architecture sustains itself when it becomes as sublime and powerful as Beethoven's

5th *Symphony* or Gershwin's *Summertime*. Music that does not move us is not music. Architecture that does not move us is not architecture. The kind of built environment that we often have today is more barren, boring, uninspiring, banal, meaningless, unpoetic and unadventurous than a documentary on *'how to raise pigs'*. How could we expect such infrastructure—that pretends to be architecture—to become architecture, let alone sustainable architecture? Our built environment, our cities become sustainable when it is a part of our journey to understand ourselves. Architecture should once again "Sing a song/ or/ Laugh/ or/ Cry" or it will become infrastructure and "go away."

Urbanism (or lack thereof) in the Age of Infrastructure

Los Angeles, New York, Tokyo, New Delhi . . . pick your city, and you have hundreds of miles of human habitations filled with infrastructure after infrastructure: roads, highways, subways, high voltage power lines, street lights, bridges, automobiles, airports, boxes of steel, boxes of concrete, gigantic malls, an occasional patch of unkempt grass or a well-kept lawn, miles of parking lots, dark rivers carrying industrial waste and the list goes on. It is all bare infrastructure. We try to understand it, or as Camus says, *humanize* it but it defies and remains ridiculous because we do not have any narratives to understand it. We dwell these bizarre cities—if we could still call them cities—with indifference, disconnectedness and alienation.

Once upon a time, cities used to be a source of poetry. Think of Athens, Rome, Paris of yesteryears and you are reminded of great architecture, art, literature and philosophy. City of today is reduced to infrastructure, just as architecture today is degraded to infrastructure. The veils of mythology and religion were lifted with the advent of scientific mode of thought. Modern urban planning and design processes have become functional, prosaic, (pseudo) scientific and barren. With the breakdown of narrative knowledge, as Lyotard pointed out, meaning has become an impossible ideal.

City is the primary domain of our pursuits—existential or essential pursuits. City is defined, formed and nourished by our pursuits, dilemmas, memories, contradictions, pleasures and anguishes. The absurdity of self and its pursuits have found its expression in an exposed and naked city. A naked city is a vulnerable city. Analogous to our existential boundlessness and absurdity, the cities grew boundless and absurd. Naked, we face each other and our cities in all our absurdity, unable to form any profound and long lasting relationships. We are amorphous. Unlike our ancestors who had the luxury of societal forms, veils, masks, charades, mythologies and a range of narrative structures to give them a form and substance, we are amorphous and left to ourselves. Until the last moment of our life, we struggle to define ourselves, our relationships, our identity and our worth. We try to cover our naked self and give a form to our amorphous self through myriad actions. Until death, we fail to achieve any of it. The city, the formless and naked city is an echo of our condition. It responds to our anguish and rootlessness. It responds to our contradictions.

Yet, we still dream of cities that have a form and substance without realizing that it is an impossible task to accomplish in the absence of existential stability and collective narratives such as literature and mythologies that could help establish connections, values, ethics and relationships between things and self. Our cities have only one logic: they respond to our functional demands—inexorable functional demands. We have lost our prerogative and capacity to dwell poetically.

The City of Banaras: A City to Die For

Now, let us go on a pilgrimage to a sustainable city that is all about *existence* and *sustenance*. If we turn our clocks back by 5,000 years, we will see, on the west bank of river Ganges in North India, a place

with three hillocks that is the seed of a very special human phenomenon, the city of Banaras. The city not only survived, but thrived over the last 5,000 years and is still very much alive. During five millennia, the city sustained its essence, character, mythological power and existential agenda.

To put it simply, people go to Banaras to die—die happily, I might add. That is a truly startling concept. We go to Las Vegas to escape the boring and banal reality of other cities and immerse ourselves in a hedonistic hyper-reality. We go to Paris to immortalize our moments of love. However, there is no other place on earth, a city where you go with an express purpose of spending the last days of your life. Think of it as an *existential airport* to life after death. In Banaras, death is not a dead-end; rather, it is a passage, a transition and a gateway. That is the *raison de etre* of Banaras. Why would anybody think up such a city like that? What means and modalities allow Banaras to attain such heights of existential resolution?

I must disclaim here that I do not hold Banaras as a representative of the cities of past, and I am not making an historical argument. Banaras is a unique and original phenomenon that has no precedent or antecedent.

Banaras is at a rare confluence of unique geography, unique mythology, unique urban form and unique cultural institutions. Banaras is located about 500 miles south of New Delhi, India. Here, the river Ganges changes her usual direction of south-east and flows back in a northerly direction as if to point at her origins in the Himalayas, the sacred mountains for Hindus. The river also takes a crescent profile as if to reconfirm the mythology that Lord Shiva—the presiding deity of the city—wears the moon on his head. The landscape on west bank rises into three hillocks and becomes the trident of *Lord Shiva*. The “other bank” of river Ganges is, in contrast, flat and plain.

Figure 1

In plan, the city is a half circle. While the west bank of Ganges has been dwelled for thousands of years, the east bank of the river has NEVER been touched. While the west bank of the city grew into a complex and congested city, the “other bank” was left totally undeveloped. The reasons have nothing to do with the city code. The other bank, for the people of Banaras, stands for the “other world” or heaven. The other half of the semi-circular city resides in the other world and people go there after they die. They metaphorically cross the existential river of life to reach the eternal city of *other* Banaras.

Figure 2

Banaras is a city of circuits. In this city, devoted pilgrims carrying food, faith and age-old stories, circle the city by following the sixteen codified sacred circuits. The city is like an onion: circuits within circuits, one finally reaches the center where the great temple of Lord Shiva resides. The form of the city is made, remade and reasserted as people trace the circuits in the footsteps of their elders.

The city is defined by neither the fort walls nor the boundaries, but by the *circuits of sacred circumambulation*. These circuits around the city and its countless temples form not a map but a mandala in the minds of devoted pilgrims as they traverse the routes chanting and reciting the myths and stories about the places they come across. In this way the pilgrims meditate the city and establish a correspondence between the city of the mind and the city of the material world. Ultimately, it is the city of mind that the people carry with them and possess—not the material city.

There is a distinction between the "map reading image" of the city and the "myth reading image of the city." *The mandala of Banaras is a kinesthetic and mytho-poetic image of the city that one forms by experiencing it through traversing it ritually in space.* You may find your way by means of a map, but with a *mandala*, you *become* the mandala. A *mandala* is no map; it is a constellation of myths, legends, imagery and sensory experiences. In the chanting of stories and traversing the city by foot, the city is constantly conserved, imagined, created and revised. Somewhere in the process of traversing the city, one existentially transforms one's own self into the city and the city is projected as an image of one's self.

The city meets its river through a vivacious interface called ghats. At the ghat²⁴, the momentum and the energy of the city of Banaras is thwarted such that it forces the city edge into a rugged, fat, haphazard, incoherent, circumstantial mass of walls, facades, spires, towers, palaces and platforms. The intersection of the city of steps and the labyrinthine Banaras is intense indeed.

Figure 3

If you are a pilgrim, you may take a walk from *Asi Ghat* along the uneven terrain of the river edge. What you come across may be the most profound and surreal, yet meaningful experience of the city and its life. Along the length of the ghats unfolds the breadth of Banarasi life:

A wrecked boat can be seen capsized in the silt of the muddy clay bank. A half-naked mendicant stands waist-deep in the water, in the company of a herd of imperturbable cows, water buffaloes, a series of dilapidated umbrellas, Peepal leaves, Marigolds, Roses, Lotuses that adore the ghats. Well-versed Brahmins conduct funeral oblations for bereft families. A forest of lamp-holding bamboo sticks, a leaning temple capsized in the soft clay, a bangle man, a rusty balustrade, a worn rope that once held the mightiest of the boats and an abandoned tower house compete for the same place at the river's edge and the viewer's mind.

Figure 4

You may also, if you are patiently and curiously walking along the ghats, meet the vandalized

stone plinths of the lofty palaces, a scale measuring the height of the Ganges when she floods in ecstasy, a blood-clad *Hanuman*,²⁵ a rusted bicycle, a group of mischievous kids flying kites, stray dogs and *Gandharvas*.²⁶ Burning corpses with swirling smoke blacken the empty edifices. Still hot ashes of a funeral pyre and a meditating yogi with a trident and saffron flag, chatting fishermen with tangled nets, graceful young girls and the floating bodies of dead infants coexist simultaneously on the craggy steps of the ghats. You wonder what brings all of these disparate things and phenomena together. While as a stranger you maybe baffled by the onslaught of images, things and events, the people of Banaras seem completely to be at home with the city. You wonder what gives them a power to reconcile their existential dilemmas with this labyrinthine city. You soon realize that, as in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, there is more to Banaras than meets the eye.

Figure 5

There the people, in an effort to experience the fullness and completeness of the world, created certain beautiful fictions portrayed in an all entralling mythology called *Kashi Purana*²⁷: Such delightful myths as Parvathi's ear rings²⁸, Divodasa's ten-horse sacrifice²⁹, a broken bow and a bride won, Indra with a diamond edged lethal weapon,³⁰ etc., situate the physical city amid a narrative and fictional city. The invisible and mythical population of Banaras far surpasses the visible population and dominates the visible world.

At Banaras, everything—by which I mean *everything*—has a story, a legend or a myth. Like the morning mist, Banaras is enveloped by mythologies—powerful mythologies. *Story telling is one recurrent way of structuring and sustaining Banaras. The sacred fiction sustains the city and its pursuits. Mythology is the form giver of the city.* Here, form undoubtedly follows fiction—immaculate fiction. There is the larger context of Gods, heavens, nether worlds, demons, Gandharvas, sages, ascetics and epics of the mythical India; and there is the fiction of the city of Banaras that fits into the larger work of sacred literature. The secret of Banaras' integrity is neither in its magnificent spires nor in its vivacious ghats; the secret of Kashi is neither in its topography nor in its traditional structures alone. The real secret of Banaras is wide open: it is the way everything is interwoven into a huge system of sacred fiction.

People come here to die. And behold, they are only too happy to die!! It is said that even a dog can be blessed with liberation if it dies within the bounds of *Panch Krosi*—the largest circumambulatory circuit that defines the city limits. Even if one has led a miserable life, death in Banaras is said to liberate one of all

the agony. The invisible signs on thousands of temples, ghats and houses in Banaras tacitly declare this eternal bargain through an ingenious epistemology of space. At *Manikarnika* ghat you could see scores of people young and old, of all castes and sexes unafraid of death! At Banaras, death, the biggest human fear and enigma, has been tamed and domesticated by the city and its mythologies. With death, all of your sins are forgiven by virtue of your being in the city of Banaras. Existence is eternal and immortal, and therefore sustainable in Banaras.

Figure 6

People in Banaras learn story-telling right from the time their mothers sang lullabies about *Lord Rama* under the moonlit sky; the time they played in the streets, shrines and the steps of the ghats and contemplated the mysterious emptiness of the other bank. When they grow up, they see the whole world as a beautiful work of fiction: a work where everything is well composed and is under the control of the author. The author is at the center and there are a million authors inhabiting Banaras, visiting it and imagining it. It is all imagination and it is powerful and enthralling. For the people of Banaras, the whole universe is replete with life. For the people of Banaras, there is nothing is inanimate or lifeless in the universe. The post-structuralist observation about the *death of author* serves as an excellent comparison between the cities of infrastructure and the city of Banaras. Albeit with a different inclination and intent, Camus made a brilliant observation that reinforces the notion of humanizing the universe: “If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled.”³¹

In the rugged undulation of the masculine land forms, people of Banaras see the trident of *Lord Shiva* or *Mount Menu*. In the feminine curves of the sweeping crescent—the Ganges—they see a caring mother. In the sky crowded with lazy clouds is a theater where, perhaps, a demon drinks *Sura, the eternal drink* in the shadow of a mountain. The emptiness of the other bank is an unfolded blankness posed against the crammed tightness of the stony complexity of this bank. *Place making is myth making: place makes myth, myth makes place. What distinguishes Banaras from other cities is that there the existential dilemmas are duly recognized and addressed.*

Figure 7

Thus, In Banaras, we see a valuable, unique and grand urban paradigm to reconcile our existential dilemmas through a marriage of architecture, urbanism and narrative means of dwelling. We learn from Banarasthat fiction is a powerful mode of imagining, building and dwelling our cities. We also learn that mythologies and other fictions are essential to enliven the inanimate world of things and infrastructure. The existential absurdity of life and death are reconciled through the architecture of the city of Banaras. As we have discussed, when such a reconciliation takes place spatially, our cities and architecture become sustainable.

Epilogue:

I hope that this essay opens new avenues and modalities to approach architecture and urban design in the age of infrastructure. Once we are able to reconcile the absurdity of life, once we are able to robe the unbearable nakedness of our cities, we might begin to re-discover our sanity and humanity, because only a sane society is a sustainable society. I hope that architecture and cities will once again “sing a song/ or/ cry/ or/ laugh” so that they do not “go away.”

Notes:

¹ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 11.

² Ibid, p. 11.

³ See Gregory Bateson, Steps to an ecology of mind (New York : Ballantine Books, 1972). Bateson—one of the most versatile and brilliant thinkers of our time—argues that the deductive logic, which is at the center of most of the western philosophical and scientific thought, runs against the grain of what he calls, “logic of nature.” He proposes—through a rare synthesis of biology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, epistemology and cybernetics—that understanding the ecology of mind is crucial to an understanding of our place in the universe. Also, important is his book Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity (New York: Dutton, 1979).

⁴ R. D. Laing as quoted by Rollo May in “The emergence of existential psychology,” Rollo May (ed.), Existential Psychology, (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 40-41.

⁵ Erich Fromm, Sane Society, (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1967)

⁶ Erich Fromm, Man for Himself, (Greenwich, CN, Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1966), pp. 48-49.

⁷ Ibid, p. 50.

⁸ Erich Fromm, Man for Himself, Op. Cit., p. 53.

⁹ Rollo May, “The emergence of existential psychology,” Op. Cit., p. 39.

¹⁰ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, Op. Cit., pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Rollo May, “The emergence of existential psychology,” Op. Cit., p. 12.

¹² Albert Camus, Caligula and Other Plays, (New York: Random House, 1958), p.8.

¹³ Erich Fromm, Man for Himself, Op. Cit., p.51.

¹⁴ Maurice Friedeman, The Hidden Human Image, (New York: Delta Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), p. 141.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.51.

¹⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 7.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 26.

¹⁸ Erich Fromm, Man for Himself, Op. Cit., p. 49.

¹⁹ Nanao Sasaki, Break the Mirror, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), p. 47.

²⁰ Webster dictionary defines infrastructure as “the underlying foundation or basic framework.”

²¹ Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, Op. Cit., p 44.

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, as quoted by Gabriel Marcel in The Philosophy of Existentialism, (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), p. 50.

²³ Le Corbusier, Towards A New Architecture, (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 203.

²⁴ A ghat is a stepped interface between a river and land.

²⁵ Hanuman is a Hindu mythological God with the characteristics of a monkey.

²⁶ Gandharvas are the heavenly musicians in Hindu mythology.

²⁷ *Kashi Purana* means the *sacred history of the city of Banaras* told through various myths and legends.

²⁸ Parvathi is the wife of Lord Shiva.

²⁹ Divodasa was one of the first kings of Banaras.

³⁰ Indra, originally a primary God during Indus Valley Civilization, is the ruler of all Gods.

³¹ Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, Op. Cit., p. 13.