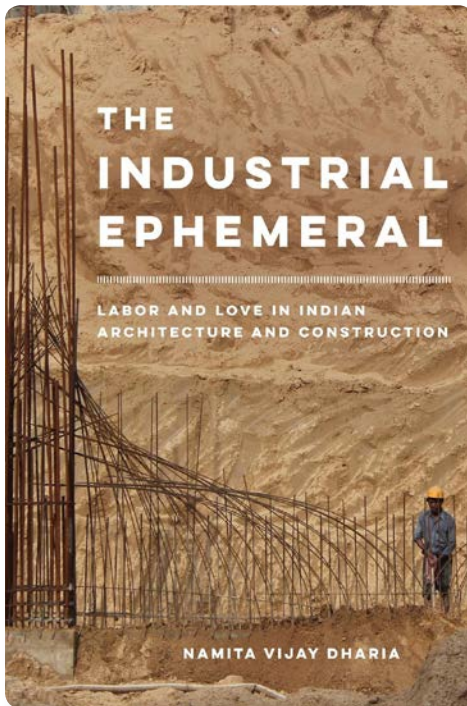


Review by Savyasaachi, Anthropologist
| savyasaachi@gmail.com

ARCHITECTURE, CONSTRUCTION WORKERS AND URBANISM



THE INDUSTRIAL EPHEMERAL: LABOR AND LOVE IN INDIAN ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

Author: Namita Vijay Dharia
Published by University of California Press,
Oakland California, 2022
Size: 152.4 mm x 228.6 mm x 18.5 mm
273 Pages, Paperback
ISBN: 978-0520383104

The book explores the overlooked perspectives of construction workers in Indian architecture, revealing the tension between temporary labor and permanent structures. It critiques masculinity's dominance and advocates for a more inclusive architectural practice.

This book is different because it gives a field view of architecture enriched with construction workers' perspectives. The author did her fieldwork in 2011 at the construction sites of Wandering Woods, a large-scale commercial real estate project, and Haveli, a residential bungalow project in Gurugram, India.

She points out that "construction's urbanism (p1)" shows that there is a "fundamental dilemma at the heart of India's urban development politics: the relationship between the ephemeral and the durable (p4)".

In the ethnographies of the book, construction's urbanism is an inquiry into how urbanism embodies these two asynchronous elements (the brief and the durable) that are integral to architecture's production processes.

The proposition is that architecture is a social phenomenon it constructs another social phenomenon namely, urbanism: its social imagination generates transient temporalities of making, and engages construction workers in a durable complex social division of labor. This is an aspect of post-colonial modernity.

It is different from 'urbanism's construction of architecture'. This occurs when the temporalities of traditional built form are harmonized with the modern. For instance, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the traditional building of the walled city of Delhi developed into a fragmented metropolis (Jyoti Hosograhkar 2005)^[1]. Undoubtedly, this is an illustration of colonial modernization of tradition.

This discussion on construction's urbanism is a paradigm shift.

[1] Jyoti Hosograhkar (2005) *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism*. New York: Routledge

The author argues that construction's urbanism discernible in the field view of architecture is an inquiry into how the power of masculinity creates divisions between industry-domesticity and between, work place-home. It's the construction workers perspective. These divisions collapse, conflate, and get interwoven when this hermeneutic injustice is countered with construction workers' labor and love. From this deconstruction of the power of masculinity, three questions arise.

First, what is the significance of "seemingly permanent, concrete architectures and infrastructures that are sustained through the non endurance of people, machines, and materials (p3)?" This is a puzzle. Second, what is the nature of permanence that this non endurance gives rise to (p3)? Third, in this situation, "Where is your home? (p 85)". These three questions highlight the subject, object, and agency of inquiry, respectively.

The puzzle points out that the agency of migrant labor is the subject of inquiry. This is discussed in chapters one and three. The object of inquiry that emerges from this puzzle is the nature of 'permanence' this labor gives rise to. This is discussed in chapters two and five. As regards the home, it appears to be contiguous with wandering love which is a subject without agency and an object without location. This is discussed in chapters six and four.

Agency of Labor: the subject of the puzzle

The author points out, according to Mohammed (MD) a labor contractor, in the field view of the puzzle, labor is the subject of inquiry.

According to the author, MD "traces the transitory states that construction requires, emphasizing the temporariness of both people and architecture". Further, "MD reiterates his fleetingness, juxtaposing it against the permanence of the property he constructs. He highlights the central work of construction economies: to render people, environment, and even life ephemeral for material gains (p8)".

In his reiteration, the puzzle is: Of what significance are two discontinuous aspects of labor-temporariness and permanence-for its agency?

The ethnographies of chapter one (Ephemeral Infrastructures) suggest that the temporariness of labor agency is a necessary enduring condition for the permanence it creates.

In this regard, MD points out that both people and architecture are temporary. This critiques masculinity which considers only people as temporary. It shows that because both are temporary, infrastructures created by migrant workers are sites for transforming relations. On these sites, the separation between domesticity and industry collapses and conflates the two aspects of labor agency. These therefore disappear and reappear on different construction sites. Thus, the fleetingness of this recurrence (of appearing and disappearing) becomes a necessary enduring condition for constructing the permanence of property.

Even so, the power of masculinity renders the 'necessity of fleetingness', non-existent, by making labor invisible in site plans, drawings diagrams, and maps of the areas under construction (chapter three: Drawing Fantasies). For this reason, these plans do not match with the ground realities. Thus, these plans and drawing are fantasies designed for "collective deceptions (p91)" and for charting pathways of power. The politics of these fantasies ensures that plans "never come to fruition (p91)". This is how construction economies render people, the environment, and even life ephemeral for material gains (of property), as pointed out by MD.

Landscapes of desires

From the deception of these fantasies, which are an expression of masculinity, arises the object of inquiry (suggested by the second question): what is the nature of ‘permanence’ when the necessity of fleetingness of labor is rendered non-existent?

The author suggests, (chapters two and five) that masculinity embedded in the landscape of desires renders fleetingness and ephemerality of labor non-existent by coding and caging it in “high-resister Hindi of government documents” “as *shanbhar* (fleeting) or *alpakaalik* (short-term) (p10)”. These terms describe the “state of being temporary within a space (p10)” (as a migrant worker) or “a temporary material state (as in a transit camp or informal settlement) (p 10)”. The mode of temporariness is either by “disappearing (*gayab*,) or by dissolution (*mitin mein mil jaana*) (p10)”. In this register, the homelessness of migrant workers is codified as ‘being temporary within a space’ and the transience of place of work is codified as a temporary material state’.

This codification of labor is a way to permanently fix its fleetingness as a necessary condition for the unhindered circulation of financial capital, without which the construction industry will not thrive (p55-59). The fluidity of this circulation, the author suggests, is akin to the financial sublime (chapter two), because it gives rise to the substance for “landscapes of desire”. (p59). On these landscapes the ephemeral atmosphere of “magic, awe, and fear (p57)” associated with fluid finance, is “embroiled in a politics of schooling-ethnicity-gender-class-caste (p65)” associated with domesticity: sometimes industry overwhelms domesticity, at other times domesticity overwhelms industry.

These masculine landscapes of desire generate a tension between “*majboori* (constraints associated with domesticity) and *mazdoori*” (constraints associated with industry) (p141-152). It gives rise to a collection of temporary practices that “circumvent proper protocol” laid out for industry and domesticity. The circumventing collapses the spheres of home and workplace. It “seems creative and celebratory when the risk of one’s action is tied to one’s future”. This, critique of masculinity is described as *jugaad* (p155-159) in chapter five (Inside the Pit).

This raises the third question. About the landscapes of desire, Where is the home?

Wandering Love

The agency in the field of construction’s urbanism is indicated by the third question: where is your home?

The author asked this question to Bala a worker and not to the residents of Greenwoods and or the Haveli! Why does this not resonate with masculinity ?

In response to the question, Bala exercises his agency and traces a winding path, draws a circle, and places a stone. This sketches an aspect of construction’s urbanism. It shows that Bala’s home is far away from his place of work. Unlike planners and designers, Bala is not drawing a fantasy. His sketch maps ‘wandering love’.

Bala’s sketch drawn on the site-ground resonates with the sensuous drawings of a home, of mother and child, and with the graphitii of exploitation, on the walls at the sites. These are multi-sensorial depictions of *pyaar* as the aesthetics of a mother’s romantic love, friendship-kinship ties, affection and affect along the lines of caste-class struggle. In these drawings love wanders between economies of sexuality and economies of real estate because it does not have a home to anchor either or both: there is a sensibility of home, but its agency does not have a location. Such homelessness is discussed in chapter six (Concrete Love).

Despite its wanderings, love is concrete when it faces the semiotics of sound embodied in man-machine relations discussed in chapter four (The Industry of Sound). Machine noise, beats, and rhythms are not multisensorial. Even without the agency of a home, *pyaar* does stand up to the sheer force of this semiotics which overtakes your senses on site and shortens their life spans (p115).

Contemplating justice

The author's deconstruction of masculinities shows that the agency of labor is undermined by the landscapes of desire and consequently, it is left with nothing more than just wandering love.

Is this sufficient for a hermeneutic justice to the construction workers' perspective, which is concerned with the conclusion (*Inqalab Zindabad*)?

The semiotics of ephemeral are incomplete without an ethnography of workers' well-being and an ethnography of the infrastructures they build. This includes on the one hand a field view of their wages, occupational health, life histories, norms of construction work, predicaments of daily life, migratory patterns, and relation between their place of work and home, and on the other hand an ethnography of Greenwoods and the Haveli.

The author may want to study how the hermeneutics of construction's urbanism critiques the overbearing presence of masculinities by undoing invisibility, of three asynchronous social aspects of the construction process.

The first aspect of the construction process is an imagination of the abstract timeline of production. The second aspect is the abstract production chain. The former is grounded in social desires and the logic of finance, and the latter is grounded in real-world contexts, circumstances, and situations. Both are ephemeral because these disappear from the construction of the built form is complete. This is asynchronous with their durability which is intelligible when both these aspects reappear along the production chain, each time a new built space is constructed. This is a fundament of migrant labor mobility.

However, both these aspects of labor mobility are transient third aspect namely, property which is relatively permanent because it outlives both. Once the construction of the built property is complete, the abstract timeline production and the abstract production chain become invisible.

Lastly, it is worth discussing why a concern for hermeneutic justice is necessary for the discipline of architecture.

Peggy (2016)^[2] argues that attention to workers' perspective questions the hegemony of the studio (Peggy 2022: 51) and prepares the ground for developing a broader definition of architecture and design that transcends formalism (Peggy 2022: 52).

Hopefully, this book will inspire similar studies, enrich architectural education, and expand the horizon of the discipline.

[2] Deamer, P. (2022) Beyond Competency-Disciplinary Efficacy in *Ardeth-A magazine on power of the project*
URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ardeth/2886>
ISSN: 2611-934X.

