
Fuzzy Existences and In-betweenness: Place and Practices of the Idol-making Industry of Kolkata¹

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The Kumartuli neighbourhood has been at the centre of the idol-making industry in Kolkata (India) for decades; however, it is situated within a larger network of allied practices that form part of the grand Durga Puja celebration. The meaning and significance of the idol is changing based on the technical know-how, changing consumer pattern and branding potential as a subsequent promotion due to the local government tourism policy. The annual Durga Puja celebration in Kolkata in recent years involves spectacular idols, pavilions and generates a havoc economic turnover with the promotion and patronage from the local government. This has resulted in a steady transformation in the everyday practices of the residents of this neighbourhood. This article investigates the changing social, cultural and the built landscape of the idol-making neighbourhood recorded through a visual ethnographic fieldwork studying everyday practices of the residents in their living and working spaces. The results indicate four different types of production units that have emerged from the growth of businesses in Kumartuli. These emergent typologies not only illustrate transformation of a homogenous residential neighbourhood to a commercial centre but also question the changing landscape of the neighbourhood.

Keywords: Transformation, slum-neighbourhood, cultural industry, gentrification, urban ethnography.

Background and the Context of this Research

The idol-making industry in the Kumartuli neighbourhood of Kolkata, India, is an important cultural industry which attracts increasing employment within the city and its rural hinterland, directly and indirectly. As well as being an important element of the Hindu-religious rituals and festivals in Kolkata, idol-making in Kumartuli is associated with the grand festival of Durga Puja, which attracts large numbers of people and has a growing international following in terms of tourism with a positive boost by the current local government. Currently, the Government tourism department of West Bengal, the Indian state (province) of which Kolkata is the capital, has stated a policy for promoting ‘tourism through the creative cultural industries and handicrafts’ like weaving, local textiles and more importantly clay-idols, which are traditional to Bengal. For this, they have secured international partnerships, like the British Council to promote exhibitions and funding (Basu et al. 2013, British Council 2018). Besides the related economic activities such as trading and tourism, this festival alone supports seasonal employment of thousands of skilled and semi-skilled work-force for building, organising and managing the festival.

The location of the potters’ cluster played an important role in the development of the cultural quarter in Kumartuli. The proximity to the river has played a role in the procurement of raw material and transport. Studies suggest that the close-knit community helped as a nurturing place to foster talent and build a social cohesion due to the caste-based² homogeneity

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² *Jati* (caste) within the Hindu practices is traditionally based on the occupation of a person and inherited through the generations. Anthropological studies reflect the complexity of the caste system in India

(Abraham 2018b), hence leading to collective actions.³ In addition to the locational advantage, a number of cultural factors and notable events in the history of Kolkata have led to the success of the idol-making cluster of Kumartuli as a whole. This section contextualises and elaborates on the development of the largest and the most prominent of the caste-based potters' neighbourhoods that has thrived in the northern fringe of Kolkata bordered by the river Hooghly to the West.

Layers of traditional ritualistic and modern arts are associated with the idol-making practice within the contested spaces of this congested *bustee* (slum neighbourhood) of Kumartuli situated at a well-connected, river front location in North Kolkata. The emergence and development of the place (neighbourhood) as the singular site and an international brand for a thriving cultural industry shape this study. Despite being in an informal setting and densely-built in a rather small area, the industry has grown from its humble beginning in the early 19th century to become one of continuing economic and cultural significance to the city more widely, with afore-mentioned effects of state-led economic regeneration and the subsequent displacement pressures still little noticed. This article will elaborate on the effects of this shift, by studying the spaces used for cultural-production while unpacking the complex layers of interwoven practices of idol-making including assembling, sculpting and distribution of idols. The spaces of production and the everyday struggles of the workers in order to prepare the idols are generally determined by the size, scale and popularity of the idol-maker and their branding potential. Individual units of idol-production, storage and residences of the *kumars* (potters) as well as the spaces outside the neighbourhood which form part of the wider network have been discussed. The present discussion also introduces the precarious nature of land and building tenure and the (non)existence of infrastructure in *bustee*-areas of Kolkata and the implications of these in the production and distribution of idols. However, these challenges, often overlooked, continue to pose hindrance in the vital transformation of this neighbourhood from a predominantly residential to a more commercialised one.

Evidences from the ethnographic fieldwork in Kumartuli particularly and elsewhere across the southern Bengal, show the industry is connected to a wider network and caters to larger communities worldwide. Kumartuli perhaps started as the idol-making hub of Kolkata because of patronage from the local *babu* (Bengali aristocrats) families, but the locational advantage of the neighbourhood played an important role in establishing the practices of and allied to idol-making here. Kumartuli has been able to thrive as a brand in itself, which is largely due to the inner-city location and a more demanding clientele enabling coordination, competition and constant evolution of the practices based in Kumartuli. Also, there remains a Kumartuli-based connection that governs the various practices of idol-making in Kolkata and places nearby, as most of them have emerged from here. The analysis unravels these place-

(Parry 2013, Heierstad 2017). Idol-makers belong to potters-caste, called *kumar* which is part of a wider caste-system, based on professions of families.

³ A spatial relocation and redevelopment project initiative by the then local government, which did not take into account the everyday practices, was collectively resisted by the residents in the year 2011 (Heierstad 2017).

based connections to the idol-making practices that are currently a booming market in Kolkata and Bengal's tourism industry. This research offers an understanding of the spatial practices and places of production of this community amidst the rapidly transforming practices and the emergence of contemporary consumerism of idols both in Kolkata and globally.

Theoretical and Methodological perspectives

Provision of territorial space is a pressing challenge currently faced by the cities of the global South. Spaces are negotiated and speculated due to the real estate pressures. Inner-city areas, mainly densely-populated 'slums' have a growing demand for spaces, which threatens existing practices and the everyday lives of residents. Informal settlements, mainly slum dwelling, has been through a process of legalising the oppression, poverty and hence policing. In his study of inner-city residents in Naples, Italy, Pardo (1996) analyses the complex ways in which the so-called poor (*popolino*) manage their existence cutting through the blurred boundaries between the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal, the material and the non-material aspects of local life. This approach can be relevant to the study of Kumartuli.

This study broadly seeks to understand the practices of the idol-making industry based in predominantly a local government registered 'slum' in Kumartuli neighbourhood and its rapidly changing spatial, economic and political character. The literature review looks at the intersection of the everyday practices and the place-based processes of the household industry of the idol-making cluster of Kumartuli in light of social practice theories and the informality of inner-city slum-areas of India. This paper engages with theories of practice in combination with place-based theories, because practices cannot be performed in isolation or away from its surroundings. The theoretical understanding of practices and the places that they are performed in, lead to the questions of human actions being direct consequences of the material, environmental or social configurations (Pink 2012).

Theories of Practice and its relevance in the global South

The theoretical and practical implications of conceptualising change in the everyday practice of a community relies on the distinct understanding of social theories developed by twentieth century theorists, Bourdieu (1977), Giddens, (1979, 1984) and de Certeau, (1984), now regarded widely as practice theory. Also, the accounts of Schatzki (1996), Pardo (1996) and Reckwitz (2002) have further developed the social theory of practice. With reference to the allegedly poor of Naples, Pardo has shown the influence that over time individual action informed by strong continuous interaction between the material and the non-material has on the structure. Reckwitz (2002) has explained that practices are routine behaviour and not habits of individuals. Theories of practice provide a platform to incorporate challenges faced in everyday life and in a way to amalgamate the contestation, coordination and competitions within practices.

To conceptualize social change from the practice theory perspective, it is important to study the empirics of the emergence, stability and transformation of practices as developed as the 'Dynamics of Social Practice' (DSP) (Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012). Using the illustration of evolution of the practice of driving, snowboarding and Nordic walking and

simultaneous abstraction from these, Shove, Pantzar and Watson, (2012) establish practice as an ‘entity’ that shapes the life of human and non-human carriers or a ‘performance’, carried out routinely. Practices constitute ‘elements’ which are connected during the enactment of practices (ibid.). Moreover, practice theory addresses the elements and conditions leading to the process of social change and/or stability. Elements of practice include the tangible ‘materials’, the skills or ‘competencies’ and finally the ‘meanings’ expressed through ideas and aspirations (ibid.). These elements form the core of the evolution or transformation of practices. Practices emerge, shift and disappear when connections are made between the three elements. The emergence and continuously shifting nature of practices is expressed through three circuits of reproduction; one through the elements and their relations, the next through the combination of co-existing practices and finally through interwoven complexities of larger practices.

DSP looks at practices as fundamental entities of social life. Practices are essentially a part of evolutionary process which encompasses continuous connection between the elements of practice (Shove et al. 2012). The evolution of coexisting practices, the changing materiality of ‘doing’ is important for understanding the flow of goods within and between societies. Competences are recorded or narrated and as part of the evolution of the practice certain know-hows are altered and/or adopted for the changed nature of the requirement for doing. Shove, Pantzar and Watson, (2012) elaborate on the diverse elements that comprises of a ‘connective tissue’ which holds social and cultural exchanges in place. Practices are essentially place-based and often embedded within the cultural landscape of a place where the necessary elements of practice coexist. Also, the sites of production of commodities through practices are as important as the mode of transportation for distributions for these items (ibid.). In other words, the history of evolution, geographies of production and distribution, are integral components that shape the elements of practice.

In light of practice theory, the central unit of enquiry is the idol making practice and the idol as a cultural item. The meaning and significance of the idol is steadily changing based on the technical know-how of idol making required for selling and branding to reach a wider clientele. The evolving practices that have shaped the working and the living condition of this idol-makers’ cluster in Kumartuli neighbourhood in for generations is the focus of this study. The everyday social and cultural practices of a community overlap with the idol-making practice within similar spatial and temporal frames. The community which contributes to the majority of idols produced and worshipped in Kolkata and beyond; operates from different smaller units of production which have historically been the living and working spaces for families of idol-makers. The dynamics of operation of the industry in the place with regards to the natural and the built environment and the constant competition and cooperation shapes this study. The particularities of the production through assembling the raw and ancillary materials within the place and the disbursement of the idol after production are aspects to look at. The precarious modes of transport or the existence (or non-existence) of infrastructure to carry out the huge exchanges that take place during one particular season is interesting and these aspects qualify the place.

Spaces are defined by practices and communities of practice where boundaries are interwoven and often blur. Not a very straightforward approach is taken to address the spatial

and temporal aspects of practices. In addressing some aspects, spaces are ‘resources’ for practice, whereas in others space is a ‘geographical location’ and an ‘outcome of practice’ (Shove et al. 2012: 130). Time is a competitive resource for a practitioner. But it is consequently mentioned that these aspects are not equivalent to those of materiality, meaning and competence. Shove argues that, spatial and temporal coordinates do not merely define the settings and scenes in which practices are performed. Moreover, practice theory in a way acknowledges that practices are place-based but somehow the aspect of space is not well established and somewhat ambivalent.

The inner-city areas of the global South are characterised by informal settlements often referred to as ‘slums’⁴ and ‘squatters’.⁵ This poses a challenge to constrained spaces of practice within slums and constant negotiations are required. Although practice theory addresses spatial and temporal aspects, but in a way, fails to address how spaces are negotiated with the posing challenges and the practicalities of living in slums of densely-populated cities. Although DSP theorises the idea of individuals as carriers of practice who locally adapt and adopt to the locally changing social meanings of practices, but social inequalities, geographical constraints or cultural diversity of the empirical examples of practices are not mentioned. In a way, those empirics do not cross the geographical and historical boundary of the recent past of the developed West.

Cities of the global South account for the majority of the urban world in recent times. Also, informal settlements account for a vast section of the cities of the global South as a resultant of rapid urbanisation and constant migration from the rural hinterland. Although informality cannot be denied in the urban context, urban theory often fails to address informality in mainstream literature (Lombard 2014). Considering the informal dwellings, outside the ‘normal’ urban governance and policy formulation criteria, results in discrimination of the informality. Informal settlements are areas characterised by self-built housing, low income households with substandard services and a low level of social and physical infrastructure in the cities of developing world (Roy 2011). Although slum population forms a striking one-third of the urban world, informal sectors are still marginalized and continue to be considered as social and economic outgrowths.

⁴ A Slum, for the purpose of Census, has been defined as residential areas where dwellings are unfit for human habitation by reasons of dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangements and design of such buildings, narrowness or faulty arrangement of street, lack of ventilation, light, or sanitation facilities or any combination of these factors which are detrimental to the safety and health (primary Census Abstract for Slum; Government of India 2013). The word ‘slum’ could be crudely defined as a compact settlement with a collection of poorly-built tenements, mostly of temporary nature, crowded together usually with inadequate basic services and subject to unhygienic conditions. Various agencies including international organizations like UNHABITAT have defined ‘slum’ in different ways, depending on the purpose and issues under consideration. However, there are certain broad similarities in definitions adopted by countries across the world: Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, National Building Organisation, Government of India.

⁵ Squatter housing was defined as housing illegally established and roughly constructed (Gedik 1993).

Although the word slum has a certain derogatory connotation to it, in case of India, some of them have been notified and officially recognised as ‘registered slums’ to get certain legalisation and advantages from the local government (Kundu 2003). This recognised status enables ‘networks of neighbourhood organisations’ to get registered land tenure and other infrastructure facilities and services for the urban poor (Satterthwaite and Bartlett 2017). Kundu (2003) documents the different categories of informal settlements of Kolkata into two broad types; authorized slums or ‘*bustees*’ and unauthorized squatter settlements. Further, the authorized settlements are subdivided into four categories. The first category is the oldest settlement that existed during the British colonial period and was formed by the patronage of local middlemen, who took land from rich land owners and help migrants to build houses and settle on them. The second types are tenancies where the residents have rented properties at nominal rents and built houses for themselves. The third category involves the local land lords building houses for the migrants to settle in them in order to keep the land holding to themselves. The tenants pay nominal rent for these houses. The last category of authorised slums are the refugee resettlement colonies formed as a result of partition of India, where the government has leased out the land to migrants for a longer term of 99 years. The word slum is used in this study not in a derogatory sense, but in accordance with the status of the neighbourhood in question. The word *bustee* is an acceptable alternative to the word slum. Slum living is characterised by unauthorised building extension, poor drainage and sanitation and public health concerns etc. in the cities of the global South. The inexpensive and frugal means do not however fail to provide a sense of security and place identity. People seldom choose to move away from the places they were born in (Tuan 1990). The neighbourhood they live in accounts largely for their everyday choices and social relations (Abraham 2018a). Likewise, do people residing in informal housing somehow learn to adjust with the reality of the struggles with the non-existent infrastructure? Roy (2009) argues that planning cannot solve the crisis of Indian informality but is the reason to produce the crisis of the informality. In other words, informality is ‘not a set of unregulated activities’ but somehow legitimising slums causes the problem.⁶

A significant set of literature suggests that the informal settlements within urban areas are not simply perceived as an image of poverty and deprivation, but a site of creativity and entrepreneurship, with underlying concepts of frugal economies and *jugaad* (Birtchnell 2011, Bhatti 2013). Urban informal settlements have been widely discussed by postcolonial theorists, but the everyday practices and networks within these informal settlements; their place-relationships and the factors affecting the development of their multi-layered networks is under-discussed. The question remains to be answered through further empirical research as to how spaces are affected through the continuous process of legalising informal areas by the government and how these spaces are evolved with the evolving practices performed in them. Also, why the resultant places remain the centres of rich/ dense spaces of spatial and economic

⁶ For detailed discussion on processes and tools of legitimacy see Pardo (2000, 2018); Pardo and Prato (2018).

practices continue to thrive, despite being outside the mainstream economy and neglect from policy-makers.

Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork has been the basis of this research, to engage critically with the production and analysis of the empirical material (Pardo and Prato eds 2016). Pardo and Prato (2018) have debated the importance of ethnographical studies as a powerful tool for understanding changing cities through innovative frameworks. Urban anthropologists stress the importance of the empirical fieldwork-based research to study and theorise modern cities (Pardo 2000, Prato and Pardo 2013, Pardo and Prato 2016). A series of qualitative techniques ranging from ethnographic approaches of semi-structured interviews, participant observation and visual documentation are broadly the core of this research. The fieldwork involved detailed ethnographic study of the neighbourhood, mapping and visual documentation of the field through photography, interviews and participant observation.

The Kumartuli neighbourhood originally consisted of 522 households, out of which 135 families are idol-makers and 42 families are involved in other allied productions. The area of the land is approximately 3.73 acres (KMDA 2009). To document the seasonal variation of the practices in Kumartuli, the ethnographic fieldwork was documented in two phases; I selected the busiest season of the year to start the participant observation or ‘being there’ (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003). During the Durga Puja season and Kumartuli is overcrowded with the people directly and indirectly engaged in the idol-making industry. This phase was used to document the agents, the networks and the challenges faced due to the infrastructure. In the second phase of fieldwork conducted in the slightly ‘relaxed’ season of summer, I documented the buildings-workshops, residences and amenities within the neighbourhood with the aid of photographs and sketches. The reasons behind the two-tier fieldwork were to document the seasonality of the practices as well as taking all pictures and not selective ones to avoid ‘sampling bias’ in a visual ethnography (Krase 2016).

The changing pattern of everyday practices on the streets and workshop-residences of Kumartuli

Kumartuli neighbourhood perhaps started as the idol-making hub of Kolkata because of patronage from the local *babu* families, but the locational advantage of the neighbourhood played an important role in establishing the practices of and allied to idol-making here. The layers of traditional and modern arts are associated with the idol-making practice within the contested spaces of this *bustee* of Kolkata (Map 1).

Heierstad writes, ‘...in Kolkata’s Kumartuli the stories of indigenous modernity seems to be concealed behind tradition. Among the potters inhabiting the shanty-like, earth-floored workshops of the caste-based neighbourhood, the history of a modern and economically neoliberal-minded India unfolds.’ (Heierstad 2017: 6).

Historically, Kumartuli has been a homogenous, caste-based neighbourhood; however, the neoliberal policy pressures resulted in increased organic gentrification to provide for the

steadily rising demands of the idol-making industry, where the space is a premium. Kumartuli is currently under a transition between becoming a commercial and production only neighbourhood. A wave of gentrification, mostly organic in nature has resulted in changes in the use of the houses in Kumartuli. A number of older buildings have been demolished and rebuilt to suit the purpose of workshop spaces. Some dwelling spaces have been rebuilt to suit multiple family-homes on multiple floors behind the workshops. Some families have outgrown the spaces, some have been able to afford a better living condition elsewhere and some have been rehoused in the nearby warehouse, modified to suit the purpose of the temporary needs of the Kumartuli rehabilitation project of the state government and KMDA. What used to be a homogenous neighbourhood of potters' families living and working in cramped conditions, is now transforming into an area of primarily productive and commercial functions driven by the local tourism and cultural economy.

Kumartuli is situated in the northern most part of inner Kolkata, in between the north-south spine Jatindra Mohan Avenue (popularly, Central Avenue) and the river Hooghly. The area lies within wards 8 and 9 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). The four roads bordering Kumartuli are Rabindra Sarani (main road) on the east, Durga Charan Banerjee Street to the north (main road), Strand Road (main road on the River bank) on the west and Abhay Mitra Street on the south (8 feet wide; Map 1). The eight-foot wide road parallel to the Durga Charan Banerjee Street is Kumartuli Street. A Street of similar width, known as the Bonomali Sarkar Street runs almost perpendicularly to the Rabindra Sarani for the entire width of the



Map 1: Schematic map of transport network and densely built inner-core area in and around Kumartuli

neighbourhood (Map 1). Most of vehicular traffic is restricted to these streets and the narrow inner lanes are usually pedestrian-only due to spatial constraints. Bicycles and motorbikes owned by local residents ply through the inner streets during the off-seasons. The inner alleys

and lanes are 4 feet to 8 feet wide with workshops on both sides; during the preparation seasons from April to October, the awnings and overhangs of the workshops made of polythene sheets encroach upon the paths leaving around two and three-foot space for people to pass through.

The roads are black topped and concrete from the wider and narrower respectively. The conditions of the roads are important to smoothly pull and distribute the idols. Adding to the already dingy and crowded conditions of the roads, there are drains with broken openings and potholes in the alleys. Both sides of the internal alleys are lined with workshops; some have attached residential units at the back accessed through the workshops and some residences have separate entrances through narrower alleys off the streets. Additionally, the streets are used for an array of works related to idol-making like clay-mixing, bamboo and straw-cutting and even sun-drying of idols or parts of it after clay-application.

The practices based in Kumartuli are connected to a wider network and caters to a larger community for locational as well as demographic reasons. The inner-city location and the connectivity to the transport infrastructure facilitated Kumartuli to thrive as a brand while the constant development of a steady clientele in and around Kolkata as well as the Bengali diaspora around the world in the age of globalisation nurtured the coordination and competition among the *kumars* who have emerged as a caste-based, family-name carrying brands (Heierstad 2017).

Traditionally, idol-making started in monsoon during the festival of Rathayatra. Growing demand for idols globally and increasing spectacle of the festival, however are slowly altering the seasonal practices in Kumartuli. The new seasonal pattern of idol-making practices start in late April and May (*Boisakh* the first and auspicious month in the Bengali calendar), followed by the busiest work in monsoon and the winter months of December and January (*Poush*, an inauspicious month) are the slowest in terms of business (Interview K6, K7, K8, K12). Although idol-making and allied practices are governed generally by the now tourism-economy driven festival in Kolkata and beyond, interestingly the idol-makers and their clients still follow traditional beliefs of religious auspices. Even the busiest workshops only build the *katham* (wooden frameworks) and carry on repair works in the inauspicious months. Factors like availability of seasonal help or lack of funds to start off preparation could also be responsible for such a pattern of seasonal practices.

The potters' humble residence (*kumor-bari*) used to be the centre of the idol-making practices. The potters balanced their everyday family lives as well as constructed pots and idols within the constrained spaces of the idol-makers quarters in Kolkata. Over the years, idol-making practices have transformed. Also, the spaces used for performing these practices have adapted, grown and evolved. The average day in a workshop-cum-residence is an overlap of the practices related to the production of idols and everyday practices of living in a densely-built *bustee*-neighbourhood of Kolkata. The streets serve as an additional space and serve many purposes: it is essentially an integral part of the everyday activities of the residents and sometimes acts as an extension of the workshop itself. These streets are frequented by curious visitors like tourists, photographers and researchers allowing little or no- privacy to the residents. The largest of the workshops are at street crossings or on the wider roads. The workshops accommodate the idols being constructed, raw materials and tools as well as all the everyday items required for housing

and dining the idol-maker and his assistants during working hours. Additionally, most workshops have a *macha* (loft) or mezzanine level made of wooden slats to provide for accommodation of men and finished idols. This arrangement perhaps is important to accommodate the seasonal workers in the workshop during the day to avoid delay in work. Very simple and affordable methods of construction have been used to construct the self-built houses. The design principles are always need-based. Most houses in this neighbourhood have brick walls, plastered with cement concrete and roofs of temporary materials. The roofs resemble ‘factory sheds’ made from galvanised steel, tin, asbestos or PVC sheets (Interview K9). The houses are between 18 to 20 feet high, with internally constructed mezzanine levels made from wooden or bamboo slats extending from the front to the rear of the houses. A ladder is generally used to access the *macha*, in order to save floor space and additional cost of staircase construction. In order to ascertain smooth running of idol-making and other related everyday practices in Kumartuli, the streets and open areas are covered with plastic sheets, temporary bamboo sheds and awnings during the prolonged monsoon season. Therefore, during this time the workshops encroach upon a considerable amount of space from the streets and common areas adjacent to it to accommodate all idol-making activities (See Figure 1(d)).

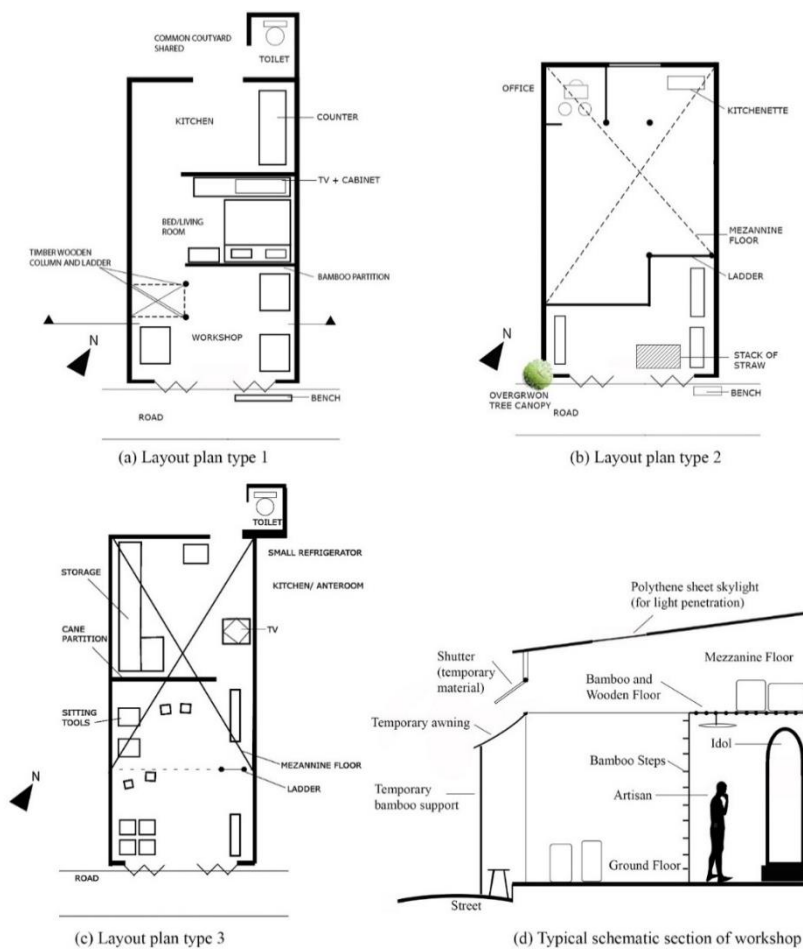


Figure 1: Layout plans and typical section of workshop types.

Based on my observation on the layout of the workshop-residences of Kumartuli, three distinctly different types of spatial configuration were identified. The following sections narrate the transformation trajectory of the workshop spaces in Kumartuli through the study of the different prevalent types- the old, the evolving and the new. Also, parallel to the details of the spaces individual sections will relate to the everyday practices performed in them.

The first type was the older workshop-residence (type 1) built for the use of a single family of idol-makers. Quite a few of this type of layout still survives in the inner alleys of Kumartuli. The second type of workshop looks like a ‘factory shed’ (type 2); purpose-built to accommodate idols (and seasonal workers). These are situated around the outer areas of the neighbourhood and are comparatively larger in size. A third and possibly the more common type of workshop are the converted or transitioning houses (type 3). These serve the purpose of a shop, workshop and accommodation, only used during the working hours. Currently in Kumartuli, due the recent confusion and ultimately failure of a state-led redevelopment project (KMDA 2009), a fourth type of workshops is emerging. This type represents the new-built or temporary sheds (type 4), constructed after the demolition of a few workshops by KMDA and solely for the purpose of retaining a space in the Kumartuli. The following sections detail out the different types of the working and living spaces in Kumartuli.

Type 1: The traditional workshop-residence

A typical workshop-cum residence has the front room, which is usually a third of the entire length of the house dedicated to idol-making and day-time activities of the residents. This front room has foldable wooden-framed tin shutters along the entire front wall which can be opened completely to allow light, ventilation and movement of finished idols (Figure 1 (a)). The back rooms are usually for the family to perform the everyday practices of cooking, cleaning and sleeping. This part of the house has one bedroom and a kitchen and dining space. The separate toilet and washing facilities at the back of the house are shared by a few families. This style of workshop-residences is situated primarily on both sides of the *Majhergoli* (the middle alley of the central core or the *Thakurpotti* of the neighbourhood).

The floors of most houses are made from cement concrete or rammed earth. Constant use and storage of the raw materials during the production accumulates clay, making the floors appear earthen and damp. Differing views have emerged from interviews on the type of flooring ideal for idol-making. Some older artists say the floor should be as ‘plain’ (level) and hard as achievable with their limited means (Interview K11). However, famous contemporary artists have said that they require soft earthen floors, mainly to avoid cracks and breakages of freshly sculpted parts of idols with soft clay (Interview K8). Although this argument considers the fragile nature of the faces and fingers of the idols during preparation, but most of the floors that I have observed were somewhat flat, levelled and made of cement concrete cast in-situ. During early April, just before the annual preparatory phase starts, most workshops undergo repairs. The broken floors of a few workshops I came across were being patched to have an even surface, otherwise, ‘the faces of the idols would be tilted’ (interview K11).

The walls of the both the houses are built to support the roof and the bamboo-framed *macha*. The houses, being mostly built with a mix of vernacular and contemporary building techniques prevalent in India, have brick and cement mortar plastered walls and a pitched tile or tin roof. The roofs are supported by a framework of timber columns based on the floors. According to the Census of India, these structures having *pukka* or permanent walls and *kutcha* or temporary roofs, fall under the semi-*pukka* category. This is a structural duality and use of building material affects the relevant property taxation criteria. Several significant factors like, road width, type and age of the buildings, building materials and nature of the built structure (*kutcha/ pukka*) and location of the property are considered in order to calculate the annual property taxes (KMC website). Therefore, residents in poorer *bustee* neighbourhoods benefit from lower taxes due to contributing factors like, narrow road, old and dilapidating buildings, semi-*pukka* houses and a designated slum location.



Image 1: Workshop-residence type 1 in April 2018, and a view of street lined with workshops

Type 2: The 'factory-shed' workshop

In late April, 2018, I studied the standalone workshops on the wider streets of Kumartuli. This style of workshops is situated around the periphery of the core *Thakurpotti* or on the Banamali Sarkar Street. These are not connected to the residences and are quite large in comparison to the front-room workshops. The length and breadth of this space is almost double the size of the front-room workshop-residences. The *macha* is built higher than the smaller workshops and provides higher headroom at the top. The total height of the workshops ranges from 20 to 25 feet (Interview K9). However, the basic spatial organisation within the workshop is somewhat similar. The building has a rectangular plan with openings at the front and the back only; the front door is fitted with foldable shutters which open up completely to allow light and ventilation (Figure 1(b)). There is small window at the back. The length of the workshop is more than 40-feet; hence the sunlight does not penetrate to illuminate the middle portion of the workshop and requires artificial lighting throughout the day. Lighting is simple - incandescent bulbs hang from holders connected through wires temporarily tied to the beams. Most wiring are not concealed, providing scope for moving light fixtures around, as and when required. The roof is supported by a timber and bamboo framework, with timber columns. The *macha* is also

made of bamboo slats and plywood boards. Unlike the smaller houses, the *macha* in this building does not run the entire length of the ceiling; it ends about halfway through starting at the back, so that there is a higher ceiling at the front of the house to accommodate taller idols. The ceiling fans are hung from the beams.

In an interview a respondent explained with mixed emotions about their building requirements and how it affects their everyday lives:

‘... for idol-making, if you give me a pukka-structure, the condition will be damped. We need openness. If it is too damp, the straw will be rotten. The clay will not dry on the idol after the application. The tin-shed, what is called a ‘factory-shed’, is what we need for idol-making... Then the heat (and light is required) [...] rain is our main enemy. Sunlight is our main energy. We will feel the heat, we will be uncomfortable, we will sweat, we will switch on the fans; only then our work will progress. If it rains, our work is hindered. This is the problem. Not a lot of people understand why we use tin-shed. Tin-shed is not for show, it is for wind and air. This is our workplace... this is for our work, this is what is required.’ (Interview K8).

The cramped spaces and frugal building constructions illustrate the everyday challenges faced by the families involved with idol-making in Kumartuli. However, the residents believe that,

‘This is my ‘motherland’. I was born here. Other people might not like it, they might think this is congested, but I have grown up here. This place... I like very much. Now, you all might think it is broken.’ (Interview K8).

The workshops are the spaces where the artists and the seasonal workers spend most of their daytime. During the peak working seasons, the artists eat and rest in the workshops, or sometimes work overnight (Interview K19). The standalone workshops are not attached to residences, although most artists live within walking distance from their workshops. Interestingly, there is a small room at the corner of this workshop. The room remains locked during major part of the day; that is, whenever not in use. The room contains a desk, a few chairs and usually serves as an office space for the main artist. The wall of the room is decorated with pictures of idols made in the past, a calendar and small wooden shrine containing figurines of Gods, regularly worshipped. A fan, an incandescent light hanging from the ceiling and a few papers and stationery completes the list of items in the room. The wooden partition wall used to build the wall is a later addition and is visible from the age of the building. The office is significant not only due to the fact that the idol-making practices have transformed from a

family affair based in the residence to standalone workshops, but also shows the requirement of client meetings and record keeping for a professional practice.



Image 2: Two larger workshops showing (a) internal layout during afternoon break and bamboo-slat roof with polythene insulation and (b) workshop frontage with half- folded shutters, wooden ramp and materials on the street.

Type 3: Repurposed Workshops

A new type of workshop is emerging in the existing buildings on the *Majhergoli* and similar narrow lanes in the core area of Kumartuli. These buildings are being modified and transformed internally to serve as workshops instead of its original purpose as residence-workshops. The owners or the main artists, who lived in these houses while also using the front rooms as workshops, are moving their families in nearby places and using these building as workshop-cum-storage-cum-accommodation for the seasonal labourers. Although the size and condition of these buildings remain like the original workshop residences, but these now serve as standalone workshops.

The plan of the workshop is similar to the type 1 with a front room, half partition, a back room and a *macha*. A toilet, also shared by other families, is accessed through the back door of the house. The particular workshop, I studied in details was part of a family-run business. The three artists; a woman, her husband, her brother, continued their father's business from this house. A few years ago, they moved out when they could finally afford to buy an apartment for themselves just outside Kumartuli. Her brother however, still continues to live in a rented room just behind the house. During, the interview, all three of them were sitting close to the sidewall with their backs at the wall and had rows of small idols, mostly unfinished, in front of them. On the opposite sidewall, a couple of small footstools were kept where customers can come and sit while their idols were being finished. This is an arrangement that is followed during the months following Durga Puja, when the business is slow and smaller idols for household festivals are

in demand. However, for the larger idols to be sculpted, a different spatial configuration is set up within these workshops, where the idols are arranged against the walls (Figure 1 (d)).

The size and height of the repurposed workshops are not as big as the type 2 workshops. Therefore, the artists have to rent storage spaces outside Kumartuli to accommodate larger idols after construction. Idols are moved outside the workshop to the storage spaces nearby and brought back for selling. This process reflects the changing needs and demands of the consumers. As the space requirement for the idol-making industry grew, slowly the workshops broke away from the residences. Holding on to the smaller workshop spaces for the purpose of doing business from Kumartuli raises questions of place-based connections, ease of business and the significance of the Kumartuli-brand name. The emergence of this new type of the workshops shows an emerging pattern of practices deeply embedded in place.

Type 4: Purpose-built temporary or permanent workshop spaces

During the preparation phase (April, 2018), through my daily visits I was able to witness the permanent rebuilding of one workshop after demolition of old buildings. Interestingly even in 2018, they chose to build the workshop with the simple traditional layout – a small room at the back and a bigger room in front. The walls were 20-feet high with a timber and plywood *macha* at the 12-feet level along the entire length of the building. The *macha* would be accessed by a bamboo ladder and the roof was being made of tin-corrugated sheets. Their families live in a rented accommodation just outside the neighbourhood. The type 3 and type 4 workshops are examples of how the Kumartuli neighbourhood is slowly transforming into units of idol-making workshop only from the traditional type 1 houses. Most importantly, the changing typologies of the workshop indicate that the brand of Kumartuli is much sought-after and retaining a ‘place’ here for business is key. However, unless triggered by an external cause, there is no significant change in the building types of Kumartuli. The front facades of all the houses are same- irrespective of old or new, contain foldable wooden framed tin/aluminium doors, plastic sheets serve as awnings supported by bamboos during the monsoon months. Precariously built benches are work surfaces and all the main artists follow traditional everyday rituals related to their idol-making practices irrespective of their type of workshop. Also, even if the workshops are newly-built, they retain the vernacular characters that have existed historically in a typical works-residence of Kumartuli.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study of the building types in Kumartuli raises questions of not only the capacity of the idol-maker to build his workshop, but certain ownership dualities that restricts new buildings. Whether the small plots of land and the buildings on them (shown in map 1) that have resulted through years of fragmentation would have provision of new building with modern building regulations is a question. The new building regulations require certain norms and setbacks guided by the plot-size and zone-location to be followed. These restrictions perhaps would negate any sizable building. Also, inner-city location raises questions on land prices, speculations and propriety. It is therefore important to understand the ownership issues, the

colonial tenancy types in place and certain slum legislations in order to analyse the built nature and transformation of the neighbourhood.

The building legislation is not very strict and the local government permits building extension without a formal planning. The land and building taxes by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation affects people’s choices of building materials and the type of finished surfaces like walls, floors etc. used in the building. As much as they want to live and work in better houses and have better roads for smooth running of their business, they would also need to finance these developments.

However, any legislation does not answer issues of the changing landscape of the neighbourhood in terms of the change in the seasonality and the practices within the workshops. A growing clientele and growth of businesses and as a result the commercialisation of the neighbourhood would call for further investigation to understand the implications of this change on the area as a whole, from an initial homogeneous residential neighbourhood to a commercial business centre with allied industries. Questions of whether or not this is another case of gentrification, state-led evictions due to unaffordability or a case of successful regeneration of a cultural industry calls for further research.

Appendix

List of interviewees

Code	Interviewee occupation	Date Interview
K1	Male, middle aged, average artist	03.10.17
K2	Male, middle aged, average artist	03.10.17
K3	Female, middle aged, well-known artist	03.10.17
K4	Male, Young, well-known trained artist at Baranagar	13.10.17
K5	Male, Young, average artist	22.10.17
K6	Male, middle aged, average artist	22.10.17
K7	Male, young, struggling artist	25.10.17
K8	Male, middle aged, famous artist	28.10.17
K9	Male, old, famous artist, Bangladeshi origin	09.11.17
K10	Male, Young, average artist	11.11.17
K11	Male, very old, waning fame	20.11.17
K12	Male, Young, struggling artist, politically motivated	20.11.17

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