
CREATIVE PLACE-MAKING: CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE AND URBANIZATION IN DHAKA

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the creative ways in which contemporary artists in Dhaka approach a specific locality within the city, its architecture, its communities and its histories. I show how they not only make sense of these encounters in their art works but how they actively claim the right to shape alternative images of and approaches to these localities. The analysis draws from my ethnographic material on Imile², a research-based public arts project organized by the Britto Arts Trust for the second time in 2014. Although many of the participating artists today live in the northern parts of the city, Britto chose to carry out the project in Old Dhaka, the erstwhile center and most southern part of the capital of Bangladesh. The article brings together considerations on ethnography, transculturality and creativity. I use these theoretical ‘building-blocks’ to discuss the (re)negotiation of urban space through the lens of place-making practices and the production of site-specific art works.

KEYWORDS

place-making, ethnography, city, urbanization, translocality, creativity, public art, site-specific art, heritage

BIO

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Introduction

In this article, I explore the creative ways in which contemporary artists approach a specific locality within the city, its architecture, its communities and its histories. I show that the practices of place-making involved in their production of site-specific art works are not only creative ways of representing but also critically engaging and actively producing the urban space. Localities such as Old Dhaka are continuously (re)shaped by translocal dynamics that connect different communities and localities within the city, the country, the South Asian region, and on a global scale. I argue that the strength of an ethnographic approach to the topic of art and urban space lies in the actor-centered perspective and its focus on the intricate fabric of daily life. This approach allows me to develop a nuanced and dynamic analysis of the city of Dhaka and work towards overcoming a persisting bias in the city’s popular portrayal as overpopulated and polluted ‘megacity’.

As traced by geographer Jennifer Robinson (2006: 4–5), this dichotomy goes back to a hierarchizing mechanism prevailing notably in the discipline of urban studies. It opposes ‘wealthy global cities’ (qualified by ‘success’ and the achievement of modernity) to ‘poor megacities’ as stagnant ‘elsewheres’ (characterized by ‘things they lack’). Dhaka has too often been reified exclusively as the latter. Looking at the city through the lens of the creative place-making of actors like the Britto Arts Trust, I argue, encourages a rethinking of this trope. I am therefore interested in the artists’ motivation, possibility and agency to critically engage the themes of urbanization, neglect, heritage, and recovery. In what ways does contemporary art stimulate the imagination of an alternative city?

I draw from my ethnographic material on *1mile*², a research based, public arts project organized for the second time in 2014 by the Britto Arts Trust.¹ I collected this material in the frame of my PhD thesis, which deals with the translocal mobilities facilitated by artist collectives on various scales from the inner-urban to the national and global space. I use the present article to engage in more detail with the urban scale.

Britto (BNG: 'circle') is an artist-run, non-profit organization dedicated to the furthering of contemporary art. It was founded in 2002 by a group of young artists (5-6 trustees, 17-18 regular members) working and living in Bangladesh, with the aim of creating an alternative space for critical thinking, experimental approaches to art, and for enabling exchange between creative individuals and groups. Besides fostering artist exchange across borders through international workshops and residency programs, Britto brought about Bangladesh's first participation at the Venice Biennale in 2011. The collective also partnered with the newly established Dhaka Art Summit in 2014 and Chobi Mela, the biggest photography event in Asia, in 2015. The workshops they organize on a smaller scale aim at encouraging the use of unusual materials and unconventional mediums, from traditional artisanry, for instance a Raku (Japanese pottering technique) workshop in 2009, to emerging art forms, such as the PIXELATION workshop series on new media art (Britto Arts Trust 2016).

*1mile*² differed from these events as it took place on the streets of the city and presupposed a long-term, intense engagement with one specific urban neighborhood. For the public arts project, Britto launched an open call, which was answered by 42 artists and researchers including the majority of Britto's members. The participants were asked to physically and creatively engage with Old Dhaka over the course of one month and on the last day, show the outcome of their engagement – be it in the form of video screenings, performances or site-specific installations – to the public.

Anthropologist Martha Radice (2018: 52) suggest that a characteristic of 'public art' is the negotiation with (rather than a participation of) 'various publics'. The targeted viewership for the outcome of *1mile*² was mainly Dhaka's cultural community including collectors and patrons of the art who received a personal invitation. Britto also distributed flyers at the major cultural institutions and through Facebook reached out to a broad network of people. The research phase, as expressed in the project description, however emphasized the communities of Old Dhaka and the protection of the area's biodiversity. Further, the accompanying talk program entitled 'Heritage, Transformation and Recovery'² set the tone for a close engagement with the history and especially the tangible, architectural heritage of Old Dhaka (Britto Arts Trust 2014).

What I find most interesting about Radice's (2018: 46) approach to public art is the second part of her circumscription of the notion. Based on Patricia C. Phillips (1989), who argued that art's 'publicness' is based on the topics it engages with, Radice contends that public projects do not necessarily need to physically intervene in public space. Rather, it is their effect on and their implication for the public sphere that constitute their 'public' quality. I show that *1mile*² effectively changed the artists perception of Old Dhaka. Further, it questioned hegemonic claims to the city and offered new vantage points for envisioning a more socio-culturally inclusive urban space

After a more detailed introduction to the project, its organizers and their localization in the city, I present the methodological and theoretical frame that I use to address the urban space. In the main part of this article, I then zoom in on a selection of site-specific works realized during *1mile*² and outline how the artists' creative place-making has led to their creation. I structures my analysis along the artists' engagement with neglect, heritage, transformation and recovery. I put a specific emphasis on Mahbubur Rahman's project as he simultaneously occupies the role of organizer and participating artist. Moreover, he is a former residents of Old Dhaka, and as such represents one of the main a 'spatial-brokers' in my research.³

¹ I would like to thank the Graduate Program for Transcultural Studies at the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe" (University of Heidelberg) for making this research possible. Further, I would like to express my gratitude towards the Britto Arts Trust for letting me work with them.

² The talk program included activist, social worker and trustee of Britto, Khushi Kabir, the chairman of the Centre for Urban Studies, Prof. Nazrul Islam, and the architect-planner, Salma A. Shafi. It took place at Britto Space in Dhanmondi on December 20, 2014.

³ Following Gisela Welz' (1996) concept of 'cultural brokerage', anthropologist Esther Baumgärtner (2009: 146) uses the term 'spatial broker' to refer to people who are actively involved in the representation of a specific locality. This includes not only professional actors behind the scenes but also institutionalized or legitimized (through the local communities or other means) representatives of a neighborhood.

Localizing 1mile²

1mile² was launched in 2009 by an organization called 'Visiting Arts' in London.⁴ The pilot program took place in eight countries (Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, England, Iran, Scotland, and South Africa) and since then, has included more than 13'500 artists, ecologists and researchers from ten countries around the world. The overall aim of the initial project, as Britto's co-founders of Tayeba Begum Lipi and Mahbubur Rahman explain, was to explore the natural and social ecology of the specific square mile that participants are most familiar with, the neighborhood they live and work in (AR, TBL/MR, February 2015). When Dona Vose, 'Visiting Arts' program manager for 1mile², approached the Britto Arts Trust regarding the project, its founders were eager to participate. However, they dismissed the idea of working in their own neighborhood:

At that time we were in Hatirpool, so we found it is not – of course it is an interesting place, wherever you do it, really interesting – so we thought, why don't we do it in Old Dhaka. This area [New Dhaka] has the look and attitude, it is very common. The people's lifestyle, the job facilities, the movements, are very similar. In Old Dhaka, every lane has differences, in architecture, in jobs, in professions. Massive shifts within short distance. So we thought, why don't we do it there because the possibility is there only. (AR, TBL February 2015)⁵

In the first decade after its foundation, Britto shifted its base seven times, moving from one rented space into another. At the time of the first 1mile² in 2009, it was operating out of Hatirpool, an area in the center of the city. In 2011, the collective bought and established Britto Space in a mixed commercial and residential high-rise building in the nearby area of Dhanmondi. Through its flexible design (movable walls, invisible doors) the permanent space can simultaneously function as studio, workstation, space for residencies, gallery, and meeting place. Especially the latter is important to the members, as there are not many alternative, open spaces in Dhaka where artists can simply meet and 'hang out' without having to spent money. Additionally, landlords and guards are suspicious of frequent gatherings, outside visitors, noise and other impairments. This is especially true for the primarily Muslim middle class residential areas around Dhanmondi, which like Hatirpool is located in New Dhaka.

The name 'New Dhaka' developed from the novel attention that was given to the areas around Ramna, Shahbagh and Dhanmondi with the establishment of Dhaka University (1921) and the demographic shifts entailed by the partition of India in 1947 and Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971.⁶ Replacing Old Dhaka, New Dhaka slowly developed as a cultural center. Today it accommodates the National Academy of Fine and Performing Art (Shilpakala), the National Museum,⁷ the Faculty of Fine Arts at Dhaka University (Charukola) and important cultural centers, such as the Goethe Institute and the Alliance Française. The first art gallery in the city 'Art Ensemble' opened in the 1960s and was located on Road 2 in Dhanmondi. Drik Gallery (1993) and the Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts (2000), Dhaka's most important galleries today, are located in close proximity.

Researchers such as Florida (2010), Meusburger, Funke, and Wunder (2009) show that a creative environment, the opportunity to interact with peers, and a corresponding infrastructure – the right milieu – constitute important factors in the artists' potential of working creatively. They also influence the artists' choice of living and working space. In fact, many of Britto's members live in and around New Dhaka. Those who do not, often questioned their living situations in my interviews, and regretted not being more closely involved with the art world. Britto's reasoning (in the quote above) suggests that Dhanmondi, although a place of dwelling (residing, working, meeting peers) for many artists, is not

⁴ Visiting Arts was founded in 1977 as a department of the British Council, and has since then worked as a platform for the promotion of intercultural understanding through the support and connection of artists around the world. The organization was registered as an independent charity in 2001 (see <http://www.visitingarts.org.uk/about/> Accessed October 1, 2018).

⁵ AR = audio records, transcriptions from interviews collected in Dhaka (2014 – 2015).

⁶ The most salient demographic shifts in Bangladesh resulted from the displacements of Hindu and Muslim communities after Partition (1947). More followed during the conflict with West Pakistan and the independence from Pakistan in 1971. For detailed information on the partition(s) in South-Asia, see Yong and Kudaisya (2008). For and account of Bangladesh's recent history refer to Raghavan (2013).

⁷ The Museum was established in 1913 and received the status of National Museum in 1983.

considered a suitable venue for a public art event and the creation of site-specific works – it is too ‘common’, too uniform (AR, TBL February 2015).

The mixed residential and commercial area of New Dhaka comprise busy streets, markets, hospitals and institutions of higher education. In our interview, the director of the Center for Urban Studies⁸ Nazrul Islam describes Dhanmondi as a ‘typical’ Bengali middle class neighborhood. Its inhabitants continue to be attracted by the institutional facilities, such as sports clubs, renowned schools and hospitals in the area. Further, the area formerly known for its modernist architecture, has been overrun by ‘imitative and reckless building practices’, that according to Ashraf (1989: 55) employ ‘remorselessly neo-classical devices’ and ‘pseudo-Islamic motifs’ (see Hoek 2012: 35). In other words, uniform concrete high-rise buildings dominate the area.

Old Dhaka is the erstwhile socio-political and cultural center from which the city slowly extended to the north. In contrast to Dhanmondi, the 1mile² organizers characterize this part of the city as having many ‘differences’, citing diversity as one of the main incentives to hold the project here (AR, TBL February 2015). The participants and observers of the 2009 edition of 1mile² agreed with their decision and described the venue and the project as a ‘success’ (see Visiting Arts and Britto Arts Trust 2010). Mahbubur Rahman remembers the project as very ‘vibrant’. He lists the collaboration with local communities in Old Dhaka, the large variety of used mediums (video, film, photography, sound work, installation, and performance), and the multisensory engagement with the area especially the smell of the local spice markets as reasons for this vibrancy (AR, MR, February 2015). Based on the 2009 experience, Britto chose to continue working in Old Dhaka. The collective applied for its own funding and organized a follow-up edition in December 2014 independently from Visiting Arts. It is during the 2014 edition that I conducted my participant observation.

Participant Observation in the City – A Mental Map of North, New and Old Dhaka

Fiona Siegenthaler (2013: 738) argues that contemporary artists “increasingly emphasize social practices, networks and processes as constituting the actual artwork”. For her, this emphasis also entails a necessary shift in the academic research focus, away from representational spaces (museums, galleries) to more practice-oriented contexts. She claims that ethnography is well suited to facilitate this shift, as the method enables researchers to follow artists into alternative spaces of practice and exhibition.

In my research, the practice of walking became a central part of this ‘following’. On the one hand, walking can be considered as an ordinary and modest activity “[...] that leave(s) behind fixed or elevated viewpoints in favor of mobile, grounded, and partial perspectives” (Pinder 2011: 675). It is related to class and economic status; many people in Dhaka cannot afford a private car and, for safety, financial or other reasons do not use public transport. Knowing where and how to walk in the city sets a difference between newcomers and frequent dwellers.

Walking also constituted a big part of 1mile². In contrast to the rest of the city, there are not many cars in Old Dhaka; the streets are often too narrow and interwoven for four-wheelers to pass. One exception are trucks that use the few bigger streets and crossings to transport goods produced locally or arriving at the harbor. On the other hand, walking in the form of the ‘go-along’ was a good method to access the artists’ experience of place. People usually do not comment or reflect on what they are doing in their daily life, thus bringing participant observation to its limits. Furthermore, interviews frequently take place in isolation; there is no other activity than the interview, which mostly takes place indoors to guarantee privacy or recording quality. Many of the addressed topics stay theoretical and maybe even superficial (Kusenbach 2003: 459). Sociologist Margarethe Kusenbach therefore suggests the ‘go-along’ a combination and supplement of basic ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interview techniques and note-taking/recording. It involves accompanying one or more ‘go-along’ partners on an outing (in this case to the venues of 1mile²) asking questions inspired by a certain behavior or place along the way and listening to/recording the explanations (Ibid: 462-463). The ‘go-along’ allows insight into “how personal sets of relevances guide [...] informants’ experiences of the social and physical environment in everyday life” (Ibid: 466). It can “illuminate the social architecture of natural settings such as neighborhoods” and inform about possible hierarchies, groupings and community-making

⁸ The Center for Urban Studies (CUS) is a self-supporting independent non-profit research and training organization working in and on Dhaka (see <http://cusdhaka.org/> Accessed October 1, 2018).

processes (Ibid: 466). And most importantly, it gives access to the manifold forms in which people engage with their environment, their personal life histories, self-location and daily practices.

Through the specific method of the 'go-along', the more classical participant observation and interviews, but also by simply dwelling in the city, I slowly developed a mental map of Dhaka.

In 2009, I came to Dhaka for the first time to intern with an NGO that was, among other projects, working in cultural preservation. I was surrounded by colleagues and friends from North Dhaka, one of the most recently developed parts of the capital city. Translocal dynamics, often of a global scale and in form of neoliberal, capitalist and developmentalist conjunctures, are most visibly territorialized here; the area is home to international and national aid and development agencies, embassies, five-star hotels, international clubs, countless restaurant and coffee chains like Pizza Hut or Kentucky Fried Chicken. The people that frequent these spaces are mostly upper middle and upper class affluent Bangladeshis, often graduates from universities abroad, or foreigners like me. While I was constrained to North Dhaka by my internship and my lacking knowledge of the city, my acquaintances chose to remain in the area. Their choice is encouraged by the government who uses police in plain clothes and CCTV surveillance to guarantee the locals' safety (AR, NI, August 2015). For them, New Dhaka, where started my PhD research in 2013 was a good shopping destination, but 'dangerous'. My colleagues and friends were used to private cars; they told me buses were unsafe, CNG (motorized three-wheelers) drivers could not be trusted and taxis were a rare sight. Old Dhaka, even further to the south than New Dhaka, would be even more chaotic, dirty and dangerous. Here, I would surely get lost, robbed or worse.

For many of the artists I then met during my PhD research in New Dhaka, Old Dhaka is out of reach. Despite their artistic interest in its appealing versatility and 'otherness', they do not want to face the city's dreaded traffic, unless they are in need of something they can only get from the local wholesale markets. A trip to North Dhaka in contrast, is often vital because of its hotels, restaurants and popularity with foreigners; meetings with collectors, curators, gallerists and friends from the national and international art world often take place there.

The observations, comments and warnings I gathered over the last years resulted in a 'mental map' of Dhaka in which markers of globality, innovation and development are closely linked to the areas in North Dhaka. From there they gradually decline, with New Dhaka being the cultural center for the largely middle class Bengali population, and Old Dhaka a place of history, a remnant of Mughal and colonial times. This map is shaped by the people I encountered and engaged with, the experiences I gained, and the place-making I continue to perform. Like that of every city dweller, it is incomplete, constantly re-shaped and often based on over-simplifications, gathered from brief encounters or hearsay. It is therefore not my intention to presuppose that this is the only possible mental map for the city. Rather, I suggest that it points to the fact that many people I met, especially from the middle and upper classes reproduced the tropes of modernity and development that Robinson exposes.

National and international media, NGO's, development agencies and often also the city's inhabitants characterize Dhaka by its lack of proper planning and safety, its density, traffic chaos, the smell of burning trash and 'slumization' (Khondker 2016).⁹ In urban studies, the label of the 'megacity' is often employed to demarcate cities in the global South. This is part of a practice "of dividing, categorizing and assuming hierarchical relations amongst cities" (Robinson 2006: 2) which has been criticized notably by Ananya Roy (2011) and Jennifer Robinson (2006, 2011, 2013). This practice is largely based on tropes of modernity and/or development which place 'megacities' in opposition to 'wealthy global cities' marked by 'success' and the achievement of modernity (Robinson 2006: 5). Megacities of the Global South become 'elsewheres' (Ibid: 4) characterized by 'things they lack', representing a 'noir futuristic urban genre of decline and despair' and the need to be developed. While these hierarchizing tropes apply to the city of Dhaka as a whole, they are also used to distinguish certain areas (and communities) within the city from others. I argue that the inhabitants of the North use notions of modernity and development to demarcate themselves from inhabitants of the southern part of the city. Robinson argues for an abandonment of the labels and associated categories of 'global city' (Sassen 2006) and 'world city' (Hannerz 1996) hypotheses, in favor of a post-colonial urban studies that draws 'inspiration from all cities' and understands them as 'autonomous and creative' (Robinson 2006: 2, 10). I therefore approach

⁹ In her 2011 article on 'Slumdog cities', Ananya Roy (2011: 224) explains how slums have become one of the biggest identifiers for Third World or megacities. For examples of similar portrayals of Dhaka, see for instance Erik German and Solana Pyn (2010) or Habibul H. Khondker (2016).

the city as a space for creative engagement and show how artists through their practice enable new vantage points beyond prevailing hierarchizing tropes. Yet, the concept of ‘creativity’ itself has a difficult history.

The City as a Space for Creative Engagement

The way in which ‘creativity’ is commonly understood in relation to urban space – as innovative practice, as tool for economic development and image branding – originated from the European Capital of Culture concept (Comunian 2011: 1158). One of its latest and most prominent applications can be found in Richard Florida’s (2010, 2012) elaborations on the ‘creative class’. Florida’s understanding of creativity, as the production of “meaningful new forms” (Ibid: 293-294), is located at the interface of art, the global market and a rapid, global expansion of neoliberal mechanisms. But while his ‘creative capital thesis’ “can help us to estimate the presence of certain kinds of creative occupations in different cities” (Comunian 2011: 1174), it does not offer an approach to how different members of the ‘creative class’ actually interact with the city and its infrastructure. Furthermore, the idea of the ‘creative city’ has the potential of serving as a further hierarchizing category, declaring certain cities (or particular areas in the city) more creative than others. Especially the latter point is assisted by the fact that the vast majority of academic research on art and the city takes place in the ‘global cities’ of the West.

In order to overcome these tropes, I offer a twofold theoretical approach: for one, by assuming a translocal perspective and then, through the concept of creative place-making.

The concept of ‘translocality’ grew out of a critique of the western-centric and unilineal perspective of many globalization theories (Freitag and Oppen 2010: 1). A translocal approach recognizes the ‘local’ as more than “simply as a site of negotiation of the global – a place where globalization is experienced by social actors” (Brickell and Datta 2011: 5). Rather, it looks at the ‘local’ from the perspective of spatial movements (Freitag and Oppen 2010: 6). In other words, it draws attention to the versatile spaces and scales of locality by emphasizing the connections between them. As a research perspective, ‘translocality’ thus supports ethnography’s commitment to the in-depth analysis of a specific locality. Yet, it de-essentializes prescriptive images pertaining to this locality (Greiner 2010). It allows me to take my research-partners’ claims to localities and about ‘local’ distinctions in the city seriously, instead of playing them against each other (Freitag and Oppen 2010: 6).

As a second part of my approach, I argue for an extended, twofold understanding of creativity: first, manifest in ordinary, daily practices, such as walking, talking and meeting people – as dwelling in the city – and second, expressed in specific, more reflected and conscious actions, such as the creation of site-specific art works. The examples of 1mile² and its participants combine both aspects of creative place-making. Friedman (2010: 153-155) describes place-making as an interplay between inhabiting/spending time in a certain locality, infusing it with value (‘In-Wert-Setzung’: Busse and Warnke 2014: 2), turning it into a center for encounters and thereby offering a new vantage point for future place-making. 1mile² thus becomes a “magnifying glass”, as Christiane Brosius (2015) has shown for a similar type of public arts festival (entitled 48°C) in Delhi, that reveals alternative narratives, “stories and voices that would otherwise remain silent, forgotten, or repressed” (Ibid: 116).

The notions of neglect, heritage, transformation, recovery, which I borrow from the talk program organized in the frame of 1mile² (see fn. 2), guide me through my discussion of the specific art works.

Neglect

One early morning in December 2014, I join Mahbubur Rahman for my first visit to Old Dhaka. I consider myself lucky to make my first experience in this part of town guided by a ‘spatial-broker’: somebody who was born and brought up in the neighborhood. We hire a cycle rickshaw for the morning, but frequently get off and walk for a while. The ride from New Dhaka is much shorter than I anticipated on the basis of what I had heard before. Rahman moves through the narrow, winding alleys and streets with ease, illustrating his familiarity with the place. Between giving directions to the rickshaw puller or avoiding people and carts, he points out relatives’ houses and places of childhood memory such as a formerly well-known and frequented cinema hall or the hospital he was born in. The latter, like most of the other buildings he mentions, is recognizable only through its face. The inner walls and rooms have gradually vanished between, behind, and beneath newer constructions. More compelling than the

remaining old buildings and their place in Rahman's personal history are his memories of 'emptiness'. He points at newer constructions and describes how they used to be empty open spaces: gardens, fields and courtyards with fountains and verandas.

His memories are imbued with a sense of nostalgia, reminiscent of Tabassum Zaman's¹⁰ observations in an article entitled 'Imagining Dhaka' (2014). She argues that the perception of contemporary Dhaka is always pitted against something that is absent: either the past, "what was and is not any more" or rural Bangladesh, seemingly untouched by modernity. She sees this mechanism as a way for the city's inhabitants to "cope with the madness that is present-day Dhaka" (Zaman 2014: 112). If this is the case, Old Dhaka is particularly well suited as a starting point for this imaginary. Ahsan Manzil, the Nawab's Palace for instance visually represents the Muslim leadership of the region. Bahadur Shah Park (until 1947 'Victoria Park') named after the last Mughal emperor is a reminder of the 1857 failed Sepoy Revolt and the British rule in South Asia. Bara Katra and Chhota Katra (mid-seventeenth century) the caravanserais of Dhaka, are gateways to the former Mughal city, places to rest and meet for merchants from all over the region.¹¹ Apart from the visual, architectural history, the composition of the local population bespeaks a history of displacement, social conflict, and migration. But despite the massive emigration of Hindus to Indian territory in the aftermath of 1947 and 1971, a considerable Hindu community still lives in Old Dhaka. Apart from these large-scale shifts, there is a slower but steady influx of people to the city from rural regions of Bangladesh, in search of labor and prosperity (see Hoek 2012).

Places like Hindu Street,¹² lined with sites of Hindu worship and shops for Puja items, the Armenian Church,¹³ the Collegiate School (founded by the British in 1835¹⁴), as well as the close proximity of temples, churches and mosques, all point to the diversity of communities in Old Dhaka. These sites display a large visual contrast to the other parts of the city, marked by concrete, high-rise buildings and mosques for the predominantly Muslim population.

From Mahbubur Rahman's descriptions, two different conceptions of neglect emerge: first in terms of an eco-political and second, in terms of a socio-cultural neglect.

On a public, institutional level, Rahman explains how developers and government authorities like RAJUK¹⁵ focus their attention on the more recently planned and economically prosperous middle and upper class neighborhoods of New and North Dhaka (see Islam 2005: 67). Further, the Department of Archeology officially recognizes only a handful of heritage sites in Old Dhaka, among them the aforementioned Bara Katra and Chhota Katra (Department of Archaeology 2016). Even fewer buildings such as Northbrook Hall or Lalkuti¹⁶ have actually been restored under their supervision (AR, NI August 2015).

Through 1 mile² many other historically important buildings so far disregarded by the city authorities came to the attention of the artists. Through their interactions with inhabitants especially their negotiations over access and permissions, the artists brought to light a possible reason for the neglect: many of the houses are subject to ownership dispute. According to collected statements and rumors, either the government, the military or illegal squatters are said to have seized the buildings after they were abandoned by their owners. This topic is difficult and sometimes even dangerous; many of the original owners were victims of religious prosecution and displacement, as I will elaborate further below. This circle of informality and sometimes even illegality, partially explains why the actual inhabitants, local communities or even the government are not able (or willing) to look after the maintenance of the buildings. The lack of economic value and resources are other reasons.

On a personal level, Rahman describes how all his childhood friends have left the neighborhood. He too has left and moved to New Dhaka and its middle class neighborhoods. Rahman also mentions the

¹⁰ Tabassum Zaman is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

¹¹ For an overview of the most important monuments of Old Dhaka and Bangladesh, see Ahmed (1984), Mowla (2011) and Hafiz (2011).

¹² In this article, I am using cursive font to highlight names for specific places and buildings found in the vernacular. Often these terms are not known beyond the local use.

¹³ The church is named after the Armenian Colony that settled in the area in the eighteenth century.

¹⁴ The Collegiate School was the first educational institute in the present-day territory of Bangladesh.

¹⁵ The Capital Development Authority of the Government of Bangladesh.

¹⁶ Northbrook Hall, also known as Lalkuti for its red color (in BNG lal means 'red') was built in honor of Lord Northbrook's visit to Dhaka (viceroy of India 1872-1876). The building was conceived as a town hall, but a public library was added on the southeast side a few years later. Until recently, the building was used as a theater hall (Ahmed 1984).

exodus of the cultural elite from Old Dhaka and the entailed disregard of formally important cultural institutions in this area:

[...] after the partition in 1947, the whole area became abandoned. All the buildings of Hindu owners became abandoned. And those are very important, vital buildings. Overnight it is not working. So the cultural shifting is quite big, it is quite upside down. We are still carrying that part of the culture. They say we are modern. In Old Dhaka, they use slang. [...] Those who tell you in Old Dhaka all the people talk slang, what about their roots? Where are they from? It hurts me when the people treat us in that way. My work. That is kind of my nostalgia. If I do anything here it is ok. If I don't do, I am here sitting, I can recall the past. I don't need to visualize my memory. When I talk, I just compare the situation of my time and this time. The situation, it wasn't like it is. [...] It is badly maintained, [...]. It was more clean, people came, all the cultural people who have an aesthetic notion. (AR, MR, February 2015)

The quote illustrates the complex, translocal connections and different layers of place-making that the artist engages in during 1mile². As a former inhabitant, an organizer, and a participating artist, Rahman constantly shifts between different positions. He observes the change his childhood neighborhood has undergone from the perspective of a former inhabitant. He is self-conscious about the nostalgic imaginary he creates as well as the opposition between valorization (past, history and memory) and neglect (present) it entails. Through his own experience with prejudices about Old Dhaka, for instance in reference to its inhabitants' use of 'slang', he exposes a deep-rooted asymmetry within the urban population mirrored in the city's landscape: Old Dhaka is qualified as an 'elsewhere' (see Robinson 2006: 4). Rahman criticizes the attitude of the inhabitants of the North, and inherently also reflects on his own position towards the communities that live in Old Dhaka.

As an organizer of 1mile², he is moreover in charge of the overall conceptualization of the project. By choosing Old Dhaka as venue, Britto marks the place as potentially interesting and creatively challenging for other participants. While Rahman emphasizes Old Dhaka's 'otherness' (as more diverse, more multi-faceted), he also enforces an engagement with the place, offering the project as a way to rethink the current perception of Old Dhaka. He wants to raise awareness not only among the other artists, but also among the wider public that the value of history and its preservation need to be addressed.

In the role of a participating artist tasked to create a site-specific art work, Rahman connects his perceptions of the neglect of Old Dhaka to his individual experiences in the area. In the account above, he suggests a correlation between the discrimination of the urban North against the South and the exodus of the cultural elite from the area. Together, these two processes fostered a disregard of Old Dhaka as a place of cultural production. He then specifically refers to the Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA)¹⁷ and expresses his frustration over the fact that the institution today is physically and 'aesthetically' neglected. The choice of BAFA as a venue for his project is strongly tied to the fact that this is the place where he started his training as an artist. The institution does not only have a general relevance for cultural production in the country, it is also an important creative space in his personal artistic development.

As for his art work, it was inspired by the oil spill catastrophe in the Sundarbans that happened during the research phase of 1mile² on December 9, 2014. This incident prompted Rahman to rethink his approach to the city and to open a dialog between the cultural heritage of Old Dhaka and the natural heritage of the Sundarbans.

Heritage

[...] and then the incident happened in Sundarban and that made me really crazy. We talk about the society; we are trying to do something. We talk about the citizens in Old Dhaka; why don't we think about the Sundarban citizens? Tigers are also citizens [...]. Every animal is a citizen of this country. They are part of our society. So, I made a link. We were hanging around this place [Old Dhaka] and then we went there [the Sundarbans]; we took some equipment to help them. It was not like making a story, it was more

¹⁷ The Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) was founded in 1955 by the widow of dancer Bulbul Chowdhury who promoted dance and music throughout his life. The Academy is an important space for the celebration of pahela baishakh (the Bengali New Year) and the anniversaries of cultural persona such as renowned poet Rabindranath Tagore and master-painter Zainul Abedin (see Debnath 2017).

an emotional involvement. And then, I filmed everything on the iPhone. I thought, I can merge these things together, so I can cover my job as an organizer [of 1mile²] and I can cover my social responsibility. At the same time I also cover my art practice. It is merged together; otherwise, I would have been stuck. I want to be an artist all the way, but not out of the society. (AR, MR February 2015)

The Sundarbans, one of the largest mangrove forests in the world, is situated in the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers on the Bay of Bengal.¹⁸ The oil spill that Rahman refers to was caused by a tanker which sank after being hit by a cargo vessel (see Ghatak 2014). In the course of our go-along, Rahman explains that he heard about the catastrophe while working on his 1mile² project and decided to look into it. He realized that the Sundarbans lacked the protection, support, and maintenance they would need in the face of the ongoing effects of human expansion. He observes that neither the UNESCO nor the Bangladeshi government made any efforts to help save the inhabitants and their habitat. Rahman decided to open up a communication between the area of southern Dhaka and the area of the Sunderbans. Although both localities are at first sight marked by oppositions (cultural/natural heritage, densely/scarcely populated, urban/rural, nature/concrete), Rahman established a translocal connection in their shared vulnerability and disregard. In his artist statement, he describes how he wanted to witness the ongoing change – often caused by human domination over nature – that both the mangrove forest and Old Dhaka's ecosystems are susceptible to. Local communities, he felt, were often left to their own devices, without much support by the government or institutions such as the UNESCO. They themselves cannot afford or have access to the required resources. As an artists and a member of society, Rahman felt obliged to take action; together with a group of friends and artists, he bought equipment in the markets of Old Dhaka and travelled to the Sundarbans to distribute aids in order to fight the spreading oil slick.



FIGURE 1: Mahbubur Rahman 'Shower with Oil' 2014-2015, six channel video installation with wooden structure (photograph by author)

¹⁸ The forest extends across the territories of India and Bangladesh. It was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1987 (for India) and 1997 (for Bangladesh) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 1992-2016).

The videos he recorded along the way constitute the material for his final 1mile² work, a six channel video entitled 'Shower with oil'. The wooden construction supporting the six projectors alludes to the structures – social, cultural and physical – people 'build' in their environment, often without care for the consequences. Rahman's installation and the thought process proceeding it, illustrate the reflective and conscious creative place-making that is employed in the production of site-specific art works. It exemplifies what anthropologist Thomas Fillitz (2002: 213) calls *kultureller Raum*. In his work on contemporary art from Africa, Fillitz argues that such a 'cultural space' refers to the art work as the matter in which the inter-linkages between the artist, his relation with the 'landscape' (physical composition of natural and social environment) and the meanings given to that environment are presented in a condensed way (Ibid: 212).

Rahman's work addresses different kinds of heritage: tangible, in the form of the buildings and 1mile² venues, natural as in the Sundarbans, and intangible as in the film industry and the literature produced in Old Dhaka. Their commonality, as I understand from Rahman's explanations, is their connection to people's roots, their role as a reminder of where Dhaka's (and in extension Bangladesh's) inhabitants come from and who they are today. How people presently treat their heritage defines what kind of future role they want to play in society and as a society. Rahman sees his own creative engagements as part of a bigger social responsibility, in which the people's heritage needs to be recovered and become part of contemporary thinking.

Mahbubur Rahman is one of the only participants of 1mile² who actually grew up in the area. However, the project includes several participants who have established a long-term relationship with the place prior to the project. Munem Wasif, a graduate and faculty member of the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, has been working in Old Dhaka for over a decade. His 2013 published book 'Belonging' is the result of his prolonged photographic exploration of the area and the daily life of its communities (Wasif and Caujolle 2013). The artist grew up in Comilla, a small town near the border to the Indian state of Tripura. He recently joined Britto as a member and uses 1mile² as opportunity to highlight the 'box camera'. The simple mechanism consists of a box which contains a lens and a film on opposite ends. According to Wasif, it is one of the oldest methods of photographing and an important part of the history and development of photography in the region. Today, there are only very few people left who know how to process and work with this technique and the artist located them in Old Dhaka. His 1mile² installation "Paper Negative" draws connections with memory and history, thus becoming a reflection of his long-term engagement with the local specialists, the history of photography in Bangladesh and the documentation of the process of this particular technique. It is also exemplary of the translocal dynamics that form part of the creative place-making he engages in. In an excerpt from 'Belonging' published on his homepage Wasif relates his childhood in rural Bangladesh to the neighborhoods of Old Dhaka: Old Dhaka "is where I had come to rediscover the same small town pulse of holding on to things rather than letting go" (Wasif 2014). Like Rahman's nostalgic approach to the past, this is reminiscent of Zaman's assumption about the 'imaginary Dhaka' conditioned by the past and/or by the rural Bangladesh. It suggests that in Old Dhaka, one can find what has been lost elsewhere in the city: tradition. Wasif's work however goes beyond this pure nostalgic engagement with tradition and its assumed opposition to 'modernity'. The artist's aim was to document the technique of the 'box camera', to show it in Old Dhaka and to raise people's (locals and photographers from other parts of the city) awareness towards its fine mechanism. Rather than 'resurrect' a dying tradition, he wants to learn from it and experiment with its different possibilities from the perspective of contemporary art (conversation with the artist, January 2015).

These first two examples highlight the oppositional relation between the perception of neglect and the (re)valorization of heritage as two crucial parts of creative place-making in Old Dhaka. Both Rahman and Wasif's work inherently already address the artists' aspiration to transform (physically or mentally) the locality of 1mile² through site-specific art works. This is even more prominent in the work of other participants.

Transformation

Shimul Saha grew up 100 km north-west of the capital city and moved to Dhaka to study fine art at Charukala. The University of Dhaka, which Charukola is a part of, is lodged between Old and New Dhaka, and like many other students, Saha remembers spending much of his time roaming the streets

of the old part of the city. During our go-along, he confidently guides me through the neighborhood, recounting the histories of places and buildings which he has gathered over the years. His main interest is in Puthi-ghar, the house of one of the region's first publishers located along Ruplal Das Lane. Although the building still exudes a glimpse of its former grandeur, its untended state is clearly visible; the paint is chipped and the facade has slowly crumbled. The ground floor has apparently been taken over by a business of sorts and plastered with concrete. Saha explains that most noticeable to him however, were the imposing front windows on the first floor; they had been closed up with bricks and scrap. While exploring the area, the artist noticed that this sealing of openings is very common in old buildings, often giving them an even more abandoned appearance than they already have.



FIGURE 2: Shimul Saha 'Whose Decision It Might Be' 2014-2015, installation (photograph by author)

"Whose Decision It Might Be", the project that grew out of this observation, is an installation of small white and open windows fixed on top of the actual closed up windows of the building. Similar to Rahman's place-making Saha's engagement with Old Dhaka and especially its architecture, is imbued with the idea of absence and neglect. The artist's foregrounding of the covered-up windows however, transforms this absence into an aspiration; although his windows are artificial and temporary, they point to the possibility of renewal and recovery. In his artist statement, he dares onlookers to open the windows and look at the history of Old Dhaka and the region of Bengal anew.

During our walk-along, we continue on Ruplal Das Lane and pass by Ruplal House. The nineteenth-century mansion with its long waterfront and its series of columns characteristic of the Renaissance style constitutes an important architectural heritage in the area. Most importantly, it physically represents the history of the Bangladeshi people, marked by conflict, migration and forced resettlement. Shimul Saha who unlike Rahman did not grow up in the area and thus is not able to rely on his own personal memories about the neighborhood, gathered most of his knowledge from historical books and personal accounts. He recalls that the impressive building used to belong to two Hindu merchant brothers. After the Partition in 1947, the brothers left Dhaka with their families and 'exchanged' their home with a Muslim family from India who immigrated to East-Pakistan. This was a strategy employed by many wealthy families in the aftermath of Partition. After Independence (1971) Ruplal House was supposedly

first claimed by the government and then brought under the control of the military.¹⁹ Several sections, I am told, have been taken over by ‘squatters’.

The geometrical shapes of Ruplal House, the impressive courtyard and its rows of columns, motivated artist Shubho Saha to choose it as a venue for his project. The artist spend endless rounds of negotiation with different branches of the government and the military to receive permission to work inside Ruplal House.



FIGURE 3: Shubho Saha 'Brick on Brick 1' 2014-2015, installation and performance (photograph by author)

His work “Brick on Brick 1” not unlike Mahbubur Rahman’s work addresses the relationship between human and natural landscape and the connection between past and present. While the orange cloth, hanging from the center of the courtyard is supposed to symbolize the fluid relation between what was and what is, the human civilization is represented through the bricks at the base of the installation (conversation with the artist, February 2015). Although the pile of bricks forms a foreign body within this confined space, the installation quickly blends into the architecture and the everyday life – the playing children, the drying laundry – of the house. The participating artists and the audience gain access to this daily life through the installation, which was only made possible due to Shubho Saha’s effort to get the necessary permits.

¹⁹ Political Scientist Meghna Guhathakurta (2016: 318-320) describes how the controversial ‘Vested Property Act’ (prior to Partition known as the ‘Enemy Property Act’) has allowed successive governments of Bangladesh to seize the property of its Hindu population.

Above, I quoted Radice's (2018: 52) characterization of public art as a negotiation with (rather than a participation of) 'various publics'. Saha's art work is an important example for this type of public art. The negotiation with the different communities over access to the space became an intrinsic part of the work.

Collaboration with local communities also was one of the intended goals of the overall 1mile² project. To my observation, this did not play an important role in the majority of the 42 projects. When I asked the organizers to comment on my observation, they mentioned that in the 2009 edition, the interaction was stronger; artists had for instance collaborated with children from local schools. But during the latest edition, many schools were closed because of the December holidays (AR, MR & TBL, February 2015). Only a small number of artists made collaboration the central focus of their art work. This might also be related to the strong emphasis on intangible heritage that caused my artists to bypass inhabitants and engage directly with the materiality of the building.

Yasmin Jahan Nupur's work is one of the only works that combines architecture and inhabitants. The artist approached the inhabitants of Boro Bari (BNG: big or tall house) and recorded their histories and memories in relation to the building. Her place-making was conditioned by the way Boro Bari's inhabitants connect to and transform the place through their daily lives and practices. Rather than identifying the building's value for herself, she focuses on its meaning and value for the people actually dwelling inside. During the open studio day she displays recorders inside the rooms, urging visitors to enter and engage with the otherwise hidden interior of the house and its residents, in search of their stories.



FIGURE 4: Reetu Sattar 'Rising of the days' 2014-2015, all-day performance at different venues (photograph by author)

In a similar line, Reetu Sattar's performance draws attention to the sharing of history. In versatile venues, she reads aloud passages from the diary of Monoda Devi, in which the author retrospectively describes her early life in the 1880s. Through this narration, Sattar intends to create a connection between 'a housewife from those days with the housewives of today' (artist statement). Her performance leads from the main 1mile² meeting point at Beauty Boarding to the private courtyard of a Hindu family, and to Farashganj Orphanage. The later is named after the Farashis (BNG: the French) who established a market at this location in the late eighteenth-century, pointing again to the translocal connections that

continue to mark the area. Through her engagement with multiple venues and communities, Reetu Sattar weaves a spatial network across Old Dhaka, creating a link between herself and the daily lives of women, past and present, from its various communities.

Each artists' place-making is very different and the four projects I discussed in this section address the issue of transformation differently. Shimul Saha and Shubho Saha's works take the architecture of their venues as a focal point, whereas Reetu Sattar and Jasmin Jahan Nupur emphasize collaboration with inhabitants. Their mediums are equally versatile and span from installation to audio recording and performance. Looking at the way these four site-specific works engage the public however – the audience invited on the day of the open studio, but also the participating artists – the relation to the notion of 'transformation' becomes clear. All four artists transform their 1mile² sites into 'places of encounter', thus realizing especially the last part of Friedman's (2010: 153-155) description of place-making. Shimul Saha forces onlookers of his installation to realize the disregard of tangible heritage. At the same time, he offers an option for the transformation of the contemporary state. Both Subho Saha and Yasmin Jahan Nupur underwent great effort to open the insides of otherwise closed houses to the public, thus transforming the outsider view of the onlooker into the perspective of an insider; letting visitors take part in the daily life of the buildings and their inhabitants. Finally, Reetu Sattar unfolds a network of stories and localities, thereby creating a multitude of spaces of encounter, between different times and nodes that would otherwise have stayed isolated.

Recovery

The term recovery invokes two different meanings: one refers to the restoration of a state that is considered normal, the other to the process of regaining ownership or control over something that was lost. Both definitions are involved in the artist's individual and collective creative place-making during 1mile², as I show in the last section of this article.



FIGURE 5: Ayesha Sultana 'Rupture' 2014-2015, site-specific intervention (photograph by author)

Ayesha Sultana's site-specific work was inspired by the impressive brick pattern and the multiple layers of meaning that qualify Panch Bari, her chosen site. Panch Bari is named after the five (panch in Bengali) brothers sharing the house. Due to the intricate lives of five families, the building is marked by

a maze of interwoven corridors, staircases, living rooms, and courtyards. The space Sultana chose for her installation however, consists of one single roofless structure, used for religious ceremonies by the Hindu community and regularly turned into a cricket ground for the children of the neighborhood. Sultana applied gold leaves to the fissures and cracks that run along the crumbling walls of the building. In a conversation with the artist (February 2015), Sultana explains that her idea is based on the Japanese *kintsugi*, a technique of repairing broken ceramics with lacquer dusted or mixed with gold or silver powder. The gold applications simultaneously conceal the slow decay of the architectural structure and high-light its devastating effects. By using the *kintsugi* technique, the artist also refers to its underlying philosophical appreciation of simplicity and of embracing of the flawed or imperfect. Her project is not about preserving the 'traditional' in the name of heritage, or overcoming it in the name of modernity. Rather, the site-specific work offers a vantage point from which to imagine a middle ground; Sultana highlights the neglected, flawed walls and offers a way of repairing their cracks without obscuring their provenance.

Regarding the overall project, the aim and course of 1mile², especially the second understanding of recovery is salient. The project is not about reclaiming ownership or control over Old Dhaka however; it is about allowing people – participating artists and other onlookers – to realize that it could be lost if current developments notably progressive urbanization and pollution are not reevaluated. As I mentioned in the beginning, many people I encountered in the northern parts of the city do not consider Old Dhaka a safe or pleasant place to spend time and dwell in. Over the course of 1mile², I saw this perception change among the participants. The more time the artists spent in the area, the more familiar they became with it. They learned to trust members of the community, who in return started to regard the artists as more than 'foreigners'. They learned where to get the best breakfast, where to stop for tea and how to walk the streets without getting lost. In the end, many told me that they planned to spend more time in Old Dhaka, even after the project was finished. The artists intended to raise awareness of the audience – mostly people from New and North Dhaka, but also locals – towards the knowledge they gained and the research they had done. Through their works, they allowed access to a new imaginary of the city. This imaginary was often conditioned by the past and the rural Bangladesh, but it also challenged viewers to reconsider notions of modernity, history, and heritage. Rahman's installation for instance inspired questions about the meaning of modernity and the side-effects of focusing exclusively on economic development. What are the consequences for the environment and the people living in it? The artist's creative place-making stimulated the imagination of a more open, positive, inclusive idea of history, of the city and its population. For the audiences, this was realized through the site-specific art works. Shimul Saha's work for instance suggested hope for the disintegrating buildings, and Reetu Sattar's performance facilitated a connection between women from different generations, religions, and different parts of the city.

1mile² however did not only generate positive effects. I have previously mentioned that the collaboration with local communities was one of the main objectives of the project, but was only realized in a small number of individual projects. Those that did involve local collaborators often visualized power asymmetries between the artist – as creative actor – and the local collaborator – as the subject of this creative action. Furthermore, the concept of site-specific works, as consciously inter-connected with the place in which they are created/exhibited,²⁰ caused debates among the participants; several works were criticized for not being related to Old Dhaka enough, others for looking forcefully emplaced into the local landscape.

Conclusion

In this article, I pursued three topics – the translocal dynamics embedded in place, the creative ways of place-making that artists engage in, and the renegotiation of the city through creative action and from a translocal perspective.

All the artists I followed approached 1mile² inspired by their personal background, interests, and experiences. Their conceptualization and final works exemplify the fact that localities such as Old Dhaka are never isolated and always cross-referenced with, compared, valued and related to other places. These

²⁰ This definition is based on how 'site-specific art' is commonly understood among the artists that I worked with during my research. For a more elaborate discussion of the topic, see for instance Kwon (2004).

relations to 'other places' form the translocal connections that play out on several scales: within the city, the national borders, the region and globally. In relation to the city for instance, they become obvious in the mental map that fixes markers of globality (international organizations, restaurant and coffee chains) and modernity (modern architecture, cultural institutions like the Shilpakala) in the North of the city, while Old Dhaka is cast as an 'elsewhere' characterized in contrast, by stagnation, decay and neglect. With reference to the country of Bangladesh, translocal connections highlight Dhaka as a destination for a steady influx of migrants from the countryside hoping for a better life in the city. This process goes hand in hand with Zaman's (2014) imaginary city, which is conditioned by the rural Bangladesh as pristine and peaceful alternative to the crowded, hectic city. The demographic shifts and political, religious conflicts caused by the events of 1947 and 1971 translocally connect Old Dhaka to the wider South Asian region, especially the neighbors India and Pakistan. Moreover, the focus on Old Dhaka serves as a counter-narrative to the rise of Islamic Nationalism in the country; the diversity of communities in Old Dhaka bespeaks tropes of naturalized peaceful coexistence, tolerance and secular 'Bengaliness' which have long been part of Bengali self-conception (see Rahman 2013; Hoek 2012, 35). This relates to a global rise of consolidated national, ethnic and religious identities. Finally, the 1mile² program was created in London and from there 'exported' to the world. Despite its very local and site-specific character, 1mile² employs globally mobile forms such as visitor maps, panels, footprints, and Facebook as an translocal advertising platform.

Further, I have argued that creative place-making is part of ordinary actions like walking, as well as more conscious and reflected actions, like the production of site-specific art works. The analysis of this place-making, through methods such as the go-along, exposes not only how the city is represented in contemporary art but also how it is critically engaged and actively produced. I referred to Fillitz's concept of the 'cultural space' to show how artworks such as Mahbubur Rahman's 'Shower with Oil' become manifestations of the social and natural landscape in which they are produced; they embody the artist's relation and valorization of this landscape. I have argued that the 'making-of-place' always comprises a 'making-of-difference' which often relies on tropes of modernity and development. Rather than reifying the hierarchization practices Robinson (2006) exposes, the creative processes foster a critical negotiation of the artists own position. I have further shown how creative place-making can foster the imagination of an alternative city. Mahbubur Rahman, while walking through one version of the city imagines and actively produces a more inclusive Dhaka, which serves as a home to various communities, animals, ideas, and histories. It is a city in which does not see modernity and tradition or history as opposites, but allocates space for one within the other. It is also a space where people are aware of the negative impacts of human expansion (urbanization, pollution) and support each-other in dealing with them.

Lastly, I have suggested that through the frame of creativity and recent writings on translocality, the city can be rethought as both creative and autonomous. 1mile² served as an example to redefine creativity beyond Florida's (2010, 2012) understanding of innovation and as a source of economic development. Creative engagement is present in both ordinary everyday practices, like walking the streets of Old Dhaka in search of the best tea shop, and in the conscious reflection over neglected heritage. These everyday and particular practices encourage the renegotiation of the artists' role in the city. As an individual artist, the role can be to raise awareness concerning the gradually vanishing tradition of the 'box camera' and its importance for the history of photography. As an artist community, it can be the revalorization of a place that used to be an important hub for cultural production in the past. And as an artist collective, the role can be that of the initiator of such renegotiation; through projects like 1mile², Britto offers the possibility to imagine a more open, positive, and inclusive idea of the city, its population, its collective identity and history. The project also opens new spaces for experimental and critical engagement that are otherwise rare in Dhaka. Through public projects such as 1mile², Britto actively contributes to the promotion of open discourse and as such forms part of the public sphere (Radice 2018).

Finally, the ethnographic method in combination with a translocal perspective allowed me to regard global and local dynamics not as binaries but as two scales of translocal connections played out in a specific locality. The analysis of ordinary and exceptional activities, the interaction between artists and the city's infrastructure, and the focus on actions and imaginaries enabled a rethinking of the tropes of modernity and innovation that persist in the research on art and urban space.

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