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COMMENTARY

Screenwriting Ethnographies: Seeing the Urban as a Becoming-Space in the Classroom

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Abstract

Written by a teacher and two students in an undergraduate course titled Housing: Planning and Policy, this commentary explores screenwriting as a pedagogical device used in service of experiential learning about the city in the classroom. It reflects on the employment of this device over two semesters wherein ethnographic vignettes were drawn upon to iteratively craft scripts, with fictional interventions guided by critical frames derived from the learning objectives of the course. We highlight the usefulness of screenwriting as a tool to embrace the urban as a becoming-space in the classroom, wherein students: 1) freely express their encounters with the built environment and feed them into the process of learning by doing; 2) immerse themselves in the ongoing city politics outside the classroom; and 3) appreciate the entangled realms of policy, governance, markets, bureaucracy, and media. Our experiments with screenwriting have been inspired by anthropological research that has brought out the multiplicity and perpetual becoming of urban political spaces. We articulate here our arrival at the screenwriting exercise and point to its potential for teaching and learning the city in anti-positivist ways.

Keywords: Teaching city; screenwriting; experiential learning; ethnography; anti-positivism; housing; India

Introduction

Anthropological scholarship from the Global South has drawn attention to the myriad negotiations and uncertainties through which the majority in urban environments get things done as part of everyday urban life (Benjamin 2000; Robinson 2006; Roy 2003; Simone and Fauzan 2013). This scholarship features post-structuralist (also Deleuze-Guattarian) currents (Bialecki 2018), which work with the “urban as a becoming space” to mark a departure from grand narratives (Benjamin 2020; Gupte and Shetty 2015).

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Following these currents, we embrace the city as a continuous process of settling and becoming and engage with its materiality of getting things done through “various constellations of actors and institutions, land, various departments of municipal and other ‘levels’ of the government, NGOs, think tanks, and Resident Welfare Associations” (Mittal and Benjamin, forthcoming). We do not reduce these material processes to mere instances of a set of logics governing the urban; instead, we explore within them more-and-other-than human entanglements that are proceeding through collaborations, negotiations, clashes, and accommodations (Mittal et al. 2023). As Solomon Benjamin (2020) remarks, “it is the clustering of the ‘messy’ bazaar—of pavement shops, of seemingly chaotic electrical power lines, and neighbourhoods that have houses incorporating shops, and shops being extensions of workshops and factories, that actually form the lifeline [of cities].” And thus, to pursue experiential learning about the city, it becomes crucial *not* to treat the built environment as a backdrop to social and political processes, but as an essential entity exercising agency through entanglements with policies, institutions, and other social formations (Simone and Fauzan 2013).

In this commentary, we reflect on our experience with more-and-other-than-human entanglements of cities as part of an undergraduate seminar—*Housing: Planning and Policy* (referred to as the Housing course, hereafter)—at the Jindal School of Art and Architecture (JSAA), of O. P. Jindal Global University. The course fulfills the curriculum requirements of the Bachelor of Architecture program. It progresses through two weekly sessions of 1.5 hours, spread over 14 weeks. The target audience of the course was mostly undergraduate students preparing to join professional practices as architects and urbanists in the upcoming years. Keeping preparation for professional practice as a key consideration, one important learning objective of the course was understanding the multiple actors (political, legal, economic, social, etc.) that shape the development, delivery, and regulation of housing in the Global South. This learning objective guided the exploration of an innovative pedagogy, wherein participants could relate to the multiple actors and appreciate the emergence of various constellations stitching them to land, economy, and municipal institutions.

Given the institution’s emphasis on anthropological sensibilities (see the article by the Dean of the School: Chatterjee 2022), the course instructor sensed an opportunity to operationalize notions of settling and becoming in relation to housing. He proposed for the Housing course to have a screenwriting component, which was received positively by the school’s Academic Advisory Committee. Thus, the course manual was designed to include various activities that prepare the students for screenwriting using ethnographic vignettes from extant anthropological research on housing in India. These activities and the outputs were to be assessed for 35% of the course’s final grade. Before embarking on screenwriting, however, students had to work on individual assignments. As part of this work, they were instructed to use primary and secondary research to explore and visually map human-material relations of a housing arrangement (that they had experienced) with different policy actors and various policy artefacts such as regulations, laws, and rules in

specific urban contexts. This assignment led several student participants to bring their own experiences to the classroom, which then served as inputs for the screenwriting process.

For screenwriting, the students worked in groups of five to six on some of the themes that emerged from their individual assignments, with each theme linked to a richly textured ethnography. The instructor shared a set of (urban) ethnographies where students could locate relatable vignettes based on discussions in the classroom, and along with a critical frame connected to the course's learning objectives. For instance, one of the themes was to explore "housing through in-situ redevelopment," anchored in the work of Bhuvaneshwari Raman (2015) and a pre-identified critical frame—i.e., to "appreciate the complicated relationship between welfarist NGOs, rights activists, and land development bureaucracies" (from the course manual: Mittal 2022). Similarly, Wing-Shing Tang's (2017) work from Hong Kong was identified as another ethnography through which to explore "housing and real estate development" with attention to the nuanced negotiations involving state, private developers, and landowners in infrastructure projects that cut the formal-informal and legal-illegal binaries within housing. Upon selection of a theme and a preliminary discussion about specific ethnographies, the groups were asked to design a three-act storyline using the vignettes present in the article. With regular inputs from the instructor, the students worked to develop these vignettes into acts while embedding the critical frames within the emerging storylines.

Delhi-Noida Script

The first script we will be addressing was inspired by a major housing-related event that took place during the second edition (Fall 2022) of the course. Two residential towers in Noida, a city located in western Uttar Pradesh and part of the Delhi-NCR metropolitan region, were demolished through a controlled implosion on 28 August 2022. These towers, referred to as the Noida twin-towers in the media, were situated in the middle of an expanding middle-class residential and commercial neighborhood. The demolition was the result of a long-drawn-out court battle, which ultimately held the builder guilty of deliberately violating building laws and bribing state officials. This event garnered significant interest on social media, with images and videos of the demolition being shared across platforms. These visuals decried the state-builder nexus and seemed to reinforce a formal-informal binary, which had been interrogated and challenged in the preceding class discussions.

To understand the ongoing politics of the twin-tower demolitions, two readings were shortlisted for discussion²—Sanjay Shrivastava's (2022) column in the *Indian Express*, and Shruti Dubey's (2018) research article in *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW). The discussions generated by these sources fed into the student groups' efforts to finalize their

² These readings were incorporated while trying to make sense of the twin-tower demolitions. In fact, one of these was published after the course commenced, which illustrates our point that embracing the urban as a "space of becoming" enables students to immerse themselves in city politics.

“critical frames” and associated ethnographic vignettes. In particular, the third author’s group made a pitch to enact the political process leading to the growth of middle-class residential and commercial settlements typical to Noida. This attempt was materialized through what is hereafter referred to as the Delhi-Noida script. It entailed working with a fictionalized settlement of *Khokhla*, which the group situated in a peri-urban area with predominantly industrial land-use according to the masterplans. The term *Khokhla* was arrived at through a blend of Dubey’s (2018) account of *Khora*, a village situated next to the areas planned for industrial land-use but which, over time, became the site for informal household industries, and the high-income settlement of *Okhla* in South Delhi, which lies across the river Yamuna. The connections between Noida and *Okhla* are manifold as there is a desire to extend the high-income neighborhood attributes of the latter to the former to attract suitable buyers and drive urban transformation. These connections are implied in the etymology of NOIDA—New *Okhla* Industrial Development Authority—and have been extensively explored in both scholarly and popular literature (Schindler and Kishore 2015; Dubey 2018; also see the plot of the sleeper-hit film directed by Banerjee and Birje 2006: *Khosla ka Ghosla*).

The plot of the Delhi-Noida script features a builder struggling to acquire land in *Khokhla* to construct lake-view, high-rise apartments catering to the aspirational aesthetics of working professionals, as he realizes the necessity of evicting slum dwellers who are well-connected to the councilors promising to protect them. However, as the media reports on and brings to public discourse the issues of forceful demolition and eviction of slum dwellers from the property, the investors face complex moral dilemmas in supporting the project. While this plot was narrated at the beginning of the screenplay through a prime-time TV report, the beginning of action zeroed in on a moment when demolition orders for a working-class settlement had been issued. The acts in the script focused on the deliberations among the various actors with respect to the moral, practical, and financial considerations of these evictions. The following is an excerpt from the script:

Act 1, Setting

“A well-known private real-estate builders’ group in Delhi, the Kalim Group, are on the lookout to acquire land to raise another High-Rise apartment complex. They identified the Khokhla neighbourhood in Delhi’s old industrial area which was now an abandoned industrial town peppered with squatter settlements. Mr. Kalim, the head of the group, himself assumed he held enough social capital to decide for these squatters and acquired the land from an old industrial owner, whose family had moved out of Delhi for a low price.

The squatters in fact did have a rightful ownership to Low Income Flats. These were mandated to be allocated within the High-rise Flats. However, these were either never made or were rented out, with their rightful owners rendered homeless. It was then that the local ward councillor, receiving money from big builders, allocated them in these abandoned towns. The big builders now had their sight on

these abandoned towns too, but this time no money from Mr. Kalim would make councillors act upon them, as municipal elections were approaching.”

The initial pitch for the script had overtones of the usual trope of real-estate agents driving off land acquisition and eviction in cities as a result of capitalist transformation. The instructor pushed the group to complicate this narrative by exploring the possible negotiations between the various actors involved—the slum dwellers, Kalim group, ward councilor, and the built environment. Eventually, the storyline began to highlight the evolving interests of these actors—for example, the eventual refusal of the ward councilors to accept bribes, as they would go against the interests of the squatters, whose electoral support they wanted to ensure. Thus, the group and several other members of the class were able to appreciate and relate to Gupte and Shetty’s (2015) sensibilities of the city’s transactional space, which foregrounds exchanges of multiple kinds that consolidate the dynamic positions of various stakeholders. Through the deliberate detailing of the setting and the thick, descriptive storytelling (Berbary 2011), the writing of the script allowed for discussing and experiencing this dynamism and the multiple processes unfolding within the urban space.

Besides blurring the formal-informal boundary, the Delhi-Noida script engaged another critical frame—namely, a view of the courts as entangled political actors (as opposed to neutral arbitrators of conflicts in the city). Towards this end, the script pointed to the key role of the courts in pushing the administration to act on elite discourses around world-class cities, eliminating “slum-like” settlements (Bhuwania 2016). Below is an excerpt from the second act of the script, which features a conversation between members of a resident welfare association (RWA):

Act 2, Scene 3

“RWA 1 (Lata): Oh god! I knew it! It’s karma of trying to displace people from their homes”

Act 4, Scene 5

“RWA 1 (Lata): TV mein dekha tha, un logon ka haal sahi nahin hain. Itni thand mein beghar kar diya gaya. Ek 7 mahine ke bachche ki jaan chali gayi. Yeh sahi nahi hua. This isn’t right.” (I had seen on TV that their conditions are not proper. They have been rendered homeless in such cold weather. A seventh month old child has lost their life. This is not done. This isn’t right.)

“RWA 3 (Lawyer) (Rekha): We’ve got another issue on hand. The residents of the settlement along with a few NGOs have filed a counter PIL. The basis is much graver—human rights violation. Moreover, they didn’t receive any notices of eviction nor were they relocated. It’s all become very messy now.”

The above dialogue highlights the fact that urban residents are aware of courts pushing the administration to act on elite discourses as part of the proceedings of Public Interest

Litigations³ (PIL) (Bhuwania 2016). And thus, the slum dwellers explore the possibility of checking this force through a counter-PIL. From a pedagogical perspective, it is crucial to note that the screenwriting exercise allowed students to keep the story open-ended and full of possibilities—for example, through the counter-PIL! It enabled participants to incorporate their own political reactions to the situation in the script and thus contributed to embracing the idea of the city as a political space that is becoming and settling. As Gupte and Shetty (2015) suggest, the city and its built environment are never tied to any failure or success of plans—only the working out of them. To illustrate such becoming of the urban, the Delhi-Noida script insisted on *not* presupposing any static positions/opinions for the characters. Rather, it made visible the various deliberations and contemplations—on human rights, retrieval of investments, and the implications of their decisions—that direct their actions.

Hong Kong Script

While some groups took a realist approach to their scripts, others turned to the fantastical/supernatural imaginary. During the Spring 2022 semester, we discussed Wing-Shing Tang's (2017) work explaining the emergence of micro-flats in Hong Kong and the arguments for how this process differs from conventional understandings of gentrification. The second author's group attempted to showcase this complexity through screenwriting about a haunted micro-flat in Hong Kong, materialized through what is hereafter referred to as the Hong Kong script. They wished to narrate a fictional account that spanned temporal and geographical contexts vis-à-vis housing megaprojects. After several iterations, their final script traced the experiences of a trio of young girls looking for a flat to rent in Hong Kong. The flat they finally rented was one on which they got an unexpectedly attractive deal. It was only at the time of moving in and speaking to other residents in the building that they realized that their new flat was infamous for being haunted and had been rejected by several other prospective tenants. As the story progresses, the trio encounters the ghost and learns that he had lived in their flat before the entire street was taken over by builders looking to "develop" and promote a lifestyle marked by comfort and luxury. Below is a short excerpt from this script:

Scene 4

"Mei: Hmm... It is concerning that we're getting this place for so cheap. The broker certainly had not mentioned anything about a ghost. Maybe we should take what the caretaker said seriously after all."

In the above encounter, the trio is reflecting on their struggle to navigate the Hong Kong housing market. The point of the ghost-association with their "cheap" flat is not to paint a dystopic image but to enter the flow of events in which such associations emerge.

³ We do not have space to detail the role of PIL in Indian urban politics. For a rich treatment of this topic, see Anuj Bhuwania's (2016) book.

As Simone and Fauzan (2013, 112) suggest, living within a built environment offers “no recourse to ‘step out’ of the flow of events, and therefore must always be willing to affect and be affected by all that surrounds it.” Likewise, *Mei* here is a product of her immediate and external environments, a consideration which factors into her pursuit of looking for accommodation in Hong Kong. Moving further in the script:

Scene 4

“Nishi: Is the micro-apartment thing true? Is it really as bad as it is made out to be on all those news agencies?”

“Mei (laughing): It is worse. We grow up with no space to breathe. And we grow up to no prospects of us ever owning our own house. We are very lucky to have got this apartment at the rent that we are paying for it.”

Mei’s laughter situates her character within the hardships of the housing crisis she faced growing up in Hong Kong. It allows the reader to gauge the impact of the crisis referred to through the character’s dejectedness and lack of control over their circumstances. Crucially, the supernatural entity allowed the script to break chronological structure by facilitating the inclusion of disparate flashbacks from different periods of the ghost’s life. In the script, supernatural fiction helped in constructing a narrative that went beyond representing the demographics of the situation. It also focused on articulating the lived experiences with the built environment that emerge from Wing-Shing Tang’s (2017) work. It shaped a narrative in which multiple characters and built forms interacted with one another within fictionalized settings, all of which were grounded in historical, legal, geographic, and other forms of data (Batty and Baker 2018).

Concluding Remarks

The Hong Kong script featured a setting that is quite similar to a globalized university classroom, which gathers wide-ranging experiences by assembling participants from multiple cities. These classrooms present us with unique opportunities to engage with the multiplicity of urban encounters while generating collaborative reflections on social engagements with the built environment. Diverse activities can be deployed in these contexts to support and reinforce this engagement. Our commentary is illustrative of the usefulness of screenwriting as one such pedagogical device. In our experiments, we have found this device useful in building multiple narratives that work with divergent arguments and viewpoints, thus adding to those of the instructor as well as the texts that are driving the learning outcomes.

These aspects make screenwriting a promising pedagogical device for embracing the urban as a becoming-space, wherein encounters with the built environment are freely expressed and fed into the process of learning by doing; ongoing city politics are not decried but engaged with; and finally, the entangled realms of policy, governance, markets, and state are appreciated rather than reduced in service of policy prescriptions.

Positivist frameworks of “knowing the city” miss out on this nuanced conceptualization of the city when they adopt a neutral, fact-oriented approach to describe the various elements of urban space, built typologies, and present prevailing patterns in different contexts. And yet, such frameworks dominate curricula, set along the criteria of objectivity and generalizability, and have become the core content of undergraduate syllabi and university-level introductory textbooks. We see screenwriting as a tool to push back against the hegemony of these frameworks, and we hope that it will be of interest to those in the global urbanist community who are keen to foreground the multiplicity and becoming of urban spaces in their teaching praxis.

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