How does an anthropologist focused on environmental and political change in Nepal come to study among environmental architects in Mumbai?

One of my most constant, and constantly fascinating, groups of interlocutors in Kathmandu was an extraordinarily committed and effective set of workers for the non-governmental organization called Lumanti. Tireless in their advocacy, and fearless in the face of repeated official threats and obstacles, I was fascinated by the group’s tenacity and effectiveness. But I also noticed that part of its strength derived from connections to a robust network of housing advocacy groups across South Asia. Among the most prominent members of this group was the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers, or SPARC, and the network of organizations that made up Slum Dwellers International. SPARC’s central office was in Mumbai, and so, expecting to further my understanding of South Asia’s regional urban housing politics, I traveled there for the first time in 2008.

A few weeks into that first stay in Mumbai, I received a call from the head of the Rachana Sansad Institute of Environmental Architecture. We had never met, and I was, until then, unaware that RSIEA existed. The institute head invited me to deliver a lecture to environmental architecture graduate students on the subject of urban ecology. My first response was a confused hesitation. What, I wondered, did architects have to learn from an environmental anthropologist? However, in part out of sheer curiosity about how this community of architects—a group with which I had not previously had research contact, and a field in which I had no
formal training—would engage with a lecture on urban ecology delivered from the perspective of someone trained in environmental sciences and sociocultural anthropology, I accepted.

Continuing my conversation with the head of the institute, I quickly learned that RSIEA was the first architecture program in India to offer a formal master’s level degree program in environmental architecture. It had pioneered what has since become a widely replicated training model throughout the country, adapted in some places with a heavier emphasis on theory, and in others with a more intensive focus on professional praxis.

As we discussed the Institute and its mission, it became clear to me that the form of “environmental architecture” codified through the creation of this formal degree program, and made up of specific and selected content, was a potentially important arena for understanding urban ecology in practice in a guise I’d not previously considered. It suggested the potential to challenge my longstanding focus on marginalized groups and marginal urban landscapes by considering how ideas and practices of nature are made among a very differently positioned group of social actors, professionals seeking to balance ecological and social well being through design. The relationship between the built form of slum housing and environmental politics had occupied my analytical attention for over a decade, but I understood little about how power and wealth asymmetries figured among professionals caught between those making policy and those who commissioned and controlled the making of the formal built landscape. My optic into coupled political and environmental transformation thus shifted from informal and marginalized housing to the ways that the makers of the formal built landscape imagined and enacted an alternative eco-political urban future. In the process, I found the distinction between the formal and informal built landscape to be, at best, a heuristic.

The present project connects to my previous research through its central theoretical and analytical questions, but the histories of Kathmandu and Mumbai are quite distinct, separate, and unique. They undergird dramatically different social and biophysical settings within which to undertake any study of the social life of urban environmental sustainability. At the same time, the connective flows of information, ideas, and affinities that brought these locations together in my field research experience—as nodes in a housing advocacy network that brought together Kathmandu and Mumbai-based rights activists—were real and significant. Specific relations of power were formed and reinforced as interconnected local organizations worked to address their cities’ housing and environmental dilemmas, forms of power we stand to miss if we stop at the conceptual boundary of two distinctive, separate cities in two countries with wholly distinctive histories. Nevertheless, Nepal’s capital city, Kathmandu, has a long and layered history as a trading center of many kingdoms; it remained on the outskirts of colonial
empire. Mumbai (earlier Bombay) is quite roundly a colonial city, and its fort, white and native enclaves, slums, and suburbs have distinctive qualities even as they compose patterns that one might also see in other modern Indian ports and presidency cities that were forged in the colonial encounter with the British. As Gyan Prakash writes, “the physical form of Mumbai invites reflection on its colonial origin . . . in fact, the Island City occupies land stolen from the sea,” and it “bears the marks of its colonial birth and development.”1 Unlike Kathmandu before the tragic earthquakes of April 2015, Mumbai’s built environment has few monuments to a deep past, yet it testifies to land reclamation and occupation in the construction of a vast empire of colonial commerce.2

To recall its past as built on land “stolen from the sea” also invites consideration of the Anthropocene future, in which the entire Indian subcontinent is cast, first and foremost, in a sea sure to “steal” coastal zones afresh.1 But the coming dynamics of sea level rise and transformed water access patterns in Mumbai and across South Asia form only one cluster of the many questions that bridge matters of ecosystem ecology to the contemporary making of this city that was first rendered through land filling, concretization, and encroachment. Mumbai is many islands fused into one; its present coastal, littoral, and intertidal ecosystem dynamics are that transformation’s legacy.

Arguably, the ecological ruptures through which contemporary Mumbai was made over the past one and a half centuries were, at the time of my fieldwork, more dramatic than those that had shaped Kathmandu. But as two of the fastest growing metropolitan centers in the region in the later part of the twentieth century, Kathmandu and Mumbai experienced similar conditions as well. With the project at hand anchored to Mumbai, then, my challenge was in part to bring a legacy of tracing political-ecological connections between two South Asian cities to a grounded investigation of the unique ecological, historical, and social context of environmental architecture in Mumbai. It was also to move from an optic on the social experience of informal housing and slum advocacy to a formal and professional world of practicing urban architects. It is this endeavor that I undertake in Building Green.

Learning a new city is neither easy nor automatic, and a single lifetime is hardly sufficient to become fully acquainted with any city’s layers. I first arrived in Mumbai dependent on the care and guidance of others, and many years later I remain a student of its vast and constantly changing ecosocial landscape. The project that informs this book would have been impossible without the generous and vibrant intellectual and social worlds that opened for me a welcoming space, and that invited me to learn, teach, and dwell among a group of urban professionals committed to an alternative vision for the city’s future.
I am deeply grateful to the students, faculty, and administrators of Rachana Sansad Institute of Environmental Architecture for their extraordinary warmth, consistent collaborative support, and endless intellectual gifts. I worked among them as an anthropologist with keen interest (but no prior training) in architecture, and this in itself could have been rightly regarded as burdensome at best, boldly reckless at worst. Yet the faculty and students received my presence among them in quite the opposite spirit: they embraced the perspective and background I could contribute, and they patiently shared their own. My respect for this community of teachers, learners, and practitioners has only deepened with time, and it is my sincere hope that the content of this book honors their unbounded gifts of time, insight, and powerful, determined aspiration. I have assigned pseudonyms to all of the student-architects who appear in *Building Green*, but as very public figures, most faculty members are named. I must emphasize here that this study, the analysis, and the core arguments I advance are my own. So too, are any errors that remain in the text.

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