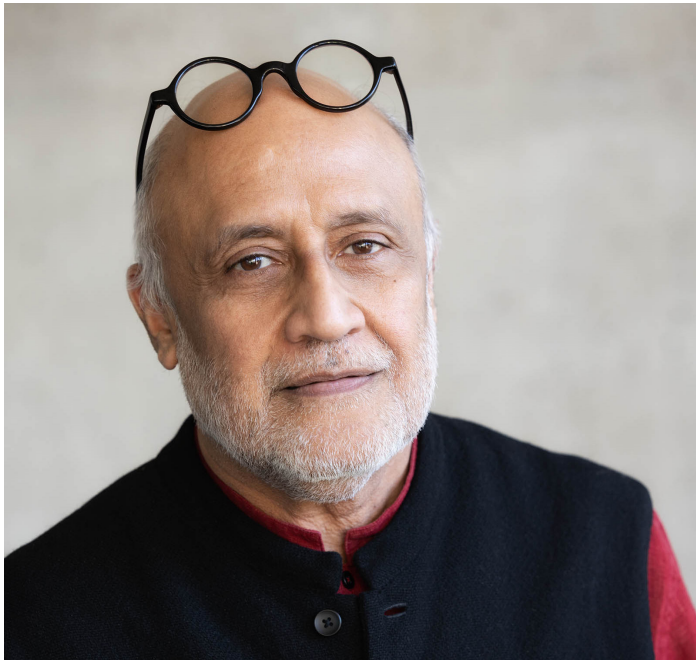**EMBEDDING TIME IN URBAN IMAGINARIES. A CONVERSATION WITH RAHUL MEHROTRA**
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Rahul Mehrotra

*Rahul Mehrotra is on sabbatical leave from his academic activities at the Department of Urban Planning and Design that he directs at Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD), where he has taught for years. He is in Mumbai, his hometown, where he founded RMA Architects in 1990. Moving between Mumbai and Boston, Mehrotra has built a very distinct discourse that has materialized into a vast collection of publications, studies and research papers —all of which were on display at the 18th Biennale di Venezia in 2023—,[1] and architectural projects, most of which were developed in India. This ambiguous, binary standpoint between professional practice in India and academic practice in the United States, between urban design and architecture, between the large and the small, between political action, to which he lays claim as an "activist", and reflection on humane and inhumane habitability conditions, was the starting point for the conception of this issue of ZARCH and also somehow steers this conversation. Mehrotra articulates a torrent of sometimes sophisticated, at other times apparently self-evident, but always inspiring and transgressional ideas, which revitalize our outlook on the world and shake up our prejudices.*

**Juana Canet, Jaime Daroca, José Mayoral, José Ramón Sierra (JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

1   Rahul Mehrotra and Ranjit Hoskote, "Loops of Practice. Theresholds of Habitability". 18th Biennale di Venezia, 2023

**We would like to start the interview by asking you about the first steps of your research on the "kinetic city" and "ephemeral urbanism". Clearly, there is a particular way of occupying the public space in India, especially in Mumbai, which is present through festivals, polyfunctional urban spaces and many other urban conditions. When did this phenomenon spark your interest? Was it after coming back from Harvard Graduate School of Design [GSD]? Which aspects of the urban configuration of Mumbai triggered the research on the 'kinetic city' and 'ephemeral urbanism'?**

**Rahul Mehrotra** [RM]:

I will start with a personal history. Following my studies in architecture in India, I pursued Urban Design at the GSD. The Urban Design Program at the GSD had an incredible legacy, but it was positioned as a form-based practice of urban design. By the time I was a student, from 1985 to 1987, I had begun to understand urban design as a practice that addresses the issue of bridging the gap between the abstraction of planning, which takes the shape of documents that are two dimensional, and the move into the practice of architecture where there is a lot of site specificity. In the eighties, when I was a student, urban design was positioned as a bridge practice, which in my mind implied that urban designers were really activists. They were advocates who were bridging this gap between the abstraction of planning, the site specificity and the myopic approach that architecture

# Embedding time in urban imaginaries

## A conversation with Rahul Mehrotra

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had come to take —an autonomous object-driven kind of practice. So, it was about creating productive feedback loops between these two sorts of disciplines, and, therefore, in a sense, inherent in it, was the notion of activism. In spite of that, one was trained with the premise that architecture could be used instrumentally through the practice of urban design to create cohesive urban form. Sounds pretty conventional and conservative, but that is what really education was set up to do!

I came from Bombay —now Mumbai— where urbanism was a different kind of practice, where temporality had a big role to play, not only culturally, but through festivals that were always the defining spectacles in the city. Even if you had a temple which you have in traditional Indian architecture, the real spectacle is the festival that surrounds the temple, not the temple itself. For me, the question became, how does one use architecture instrumentally? I struggled with that idea for a long time.

There were two books that influenced me a great deal. One was a book called *Soft City,*[2] by Jonathan Raban, where he basically argued for the 'soft city'. This concept revolved not around architecture itself, but rather around the associative values and human constructs that shape spaces in specific ways. The other book that was a great influence for me was

*Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie.[3] This book about Mumbai allowed me to see my own city which, otherwise, we understood only through architecture. Through 'magic realism', Salman Rushdie created events and happenings that gave rise to another form of associative value, which, as a methodology, opened up a whole new direction to think about Mumbai (then Bombay) and to understand the Indian city. And then, the third influence was a very well-known Indian photographer called Raghubi Singh,[4] a friend who passed away twenty years ago. He made books about different parts of India using his images and when he decided to make a book on Bombay, he did not use the skyline of the city for the cover. Instead of using architecture, he used the festival of the immersion of the Ganesh Chaturthi[5] as the spectacle that defined the city. He chose an ephemeral event, which was an enacted moment, to represent Bombay, and that was mind-blowing in terms of rethinking how instrumental architecture really is for urban design. My education, challenged by the context that I worked in, made me question the notion of the 'static city', or architecture as the only instrument by which a city can be imagined, and made me think of the 'soft city', the festivals, which are ephemeral moments that are enacted, that

3    Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981)

4    Raghubir Singh (Jaipur India 1942 - New York USA, 1999).

5    Ganesh Chaturthi is a Hindu religious festival held in honor of the deity Ganesha. It is held within the privacy of people's homes but also celebrated through public acts in each community.

2    Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (London: Hamis Hamilton, 1974)

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leave no memory, and are also powerful mechanisms to construct the identity and the image of the city.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**In several lectures and writings, you mention the importance of stepping away from building binaries — formal vs informal, temporal vs permanent, global vs local— because they are not productive categories. Can you explain how the boundaries between the permanent and the temporary are dissolved within the urban environment?**

**(RM):**

We have to challenge the notion of binaries. We can construct any number of binaries: the rich, the poor, the rural, the urban, etc., and these are very useful ways to organize the world around us. However, it does not allow us to find solutions because design, and then, by extension, urban design, is about the dissolution of binaries. It is about examining very different sorts of forces in the city, which are aspirational, which relate to land markets, questions of equity and iniquity or questions of politics. Urban design resolves those contestations through instrumentalizing space-making, architecture and, generally, planning. Design is about synthesizing things to make other things, and, therefore, that is where the binaries hinder our ability to think productively about design. If we create these polarities, we tend to live in one of them or the other world. So, if we become architects that are involved in the informal city, for example, and commit ourselves fully to this issue, then we live in a well because we create a boundary around ourselves. However, the challenge of architecture and urban design is that there should be no formal and informal city, there should be the city that accommodates diversity and pluralism in a cohesive manner. We should find different ways of accommodating different income groups, different ethnic groups or communities that, otherwise, are seen in polarity. And, therefore, I would argue that binaries are a good way to start to organize and make sense of the world around us, but we have to be cautious as designers that they do not prevent us from going into the synthetic mode, which is about the resolution of contestation to make space that makes a healthy city.

In my view, the most successful forms of urban design and even urban planning, are places that encourage and facilitate multiple associations and constituencies, different forms of memory and demographics that can relate to the space differently. In short, they foster multiplicity rather than singularity. And if we stay with binaries, we also run the danger of perpetuating singularities.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**When would you say, Rahul, that there are moments within the city where there is a clear dialog between the more permanent and temporary elements. Do the permanent conditions exist within temporary occupations? Is temporality present in more static elements of the urban fabric?**

**(RM):**

In my mind, something like the Nolli map has great relevance even today as a map that illustrates public spaces. I have used the idea of the Victorian Arcades in Mumbai[6] as an example of where architecture at some moment converts into an armature that encompasses many other uses without losing its own integrity. The Nolli map showed how you could have this porosity of public space and access without compromising the integrity of the architecture. So, how do you allow spaces to do that? The Arcades were built in the Victorian times by the British, but they have recently been occupied by bazaars, allowing the informal economy to penetrate them, but they still keep the illusion of the architecture intact. So, then, architecture begins to serve as an armature, not as an autonomous object in itself. Then, as designers, if we want to talk about dissolving binaries, we need to think about design, program and how the generosity of buildings can materialize in the public realm differently. And, again, the binary of the public vs private is one that has to go, as well as learning from a place like India and many Asian cities. When I was studying architecture, it was never public and private space. We always said private space, semi-private space, semi-public space, public space. And, then you could even talk about sacred space. So, it was a much more nuanced understanding of space, which came from a very particular contextual condition. But then, when I came to study in the West, it was public and private space, it was set up already as a binary, not as a grey scale.

If we position temporality versus the permanent, we should not get stuck in the binary because that is again a danger. You say temporary, are you, then, contesting the permanent? No,

6    Sharada Dwivedi and Rahul Mehrotra, *Fort Walks* (Bombay: Eminence Designs, 2001).

my response to your question would be that it is not a matter of this or the other. It is a matter of both. And, therefore, that is where designers have to take up the challenge, on that scale between the permanent and the temporary. How do you calibrate how much is permanent and how much is temporary? So, that becomes a design challenge. I think it's critical to situate our challenges in these terms. Otherwise, we are going to articulate the problem in simplistic ways, and we will resort to binaries. How do all these sociological questions of identity, culture production, spaces of refuge, spaces of comfort and spaces of recreation engage with both? So, does everything have to be imagined as being permanent? Or is there a scale on which we can calibrate what needs to be permanent? The most permanent thing in a city is the subdivision of land. The plots last for hundreds of years. Broad zoning is the next most permanent, and the buildings actually are the most temporary, although they give you the illusion of permanence.

My answer to your question is that we have to infect the debate of planning and urban design, which is premised on the notion of permanence, by unsettling it. Think about other categories that will allow us to embed time in our imaginations, which can be very productive for two or three reasons. First, in terms of resources, we do not have to build a building for five hundred years. If necessary, we can build it for ten years and we can make it out of a kit of parts that can be recycled. Second, we do not lock ourselves into permanent solutions because we allow flexibility for the future and for change. That is the other end of the spectrum. And, so, coming back to your question, the short answer would be that it is not one or the other. It is not a binary. It is about calibrating across the scales: how much or what in different situations. And I think that is the design challenge for the future.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**In several lectures, you mention the importance of considering time as a critical factor for understanding and analyzing the urban environment as opposed to the default parameter: space. This understanding of time is very present in the way occupations are mapped in the cases studies illustrated in the 'ephemeral urbanism' research and, especially, in the book *Kumbh Mela:* Mapping the Ephemeral Megacity[7] and in the pavilion at the**

7    Rahul Mehrotra and Felipe Vera, *Kumbh Mela: Mapping the Ephemeral Megacity* (Ostfildern: Hatje Catz, 2015).

**Venice Biennale 'Does permanence matter?'[8] How can we, as designers, architects and planners, integrate time as a more determining factor?**

**(RM):**

Time has been very absent in our discussions about architecture, especially about urban design and planning. However, landscape by default imagines time. A good landscape architect thinks of seasons and time continuously. Even though they are not articulating it so consciously, landscape architects are thinking of time because nature has its rhythms which you have to follow. Plants grow, bloom or flourish and die in a largely predictable rhythm. We have not thought like this adequately in architecture, urban design and planning. Buildings and cities also grow, flourish, weather and have to be renewed.

Time can be a very productive imaginary to bring into our design sensibilities the ability to ask the right questions: for how long are you designing something and for what? And the other aspect would be in relation to material life cycles. It will help us be more mindful about resources because we will think about time and the way it is embedded differently. Let me give you a very specific example of materials. In historic preservation or conservation, which is something in which our practice has been very involved, all the problems in an older building lie at the point where two materials of two different life cycles meet each other. When you have a wooden rafter sitting on a stone wall, the edge of the wood rots. The stone will last for one thousand years, but the wood has a life cycle of maybe two hundred years. So, time can be used in many productively manipulative ways, down to the detail of architecture, as well as to the imagination of a city, in order to project what might become redundant or where, because, as a society, we cannot bet on something for too long. The example I give is the two thousand completely abandoned shopping malls in America that have become irrelevant after Amazon and other forms of online shopping emerged. No

8    This refers to the "Ephemeral Urbanism - Cities in Constant Flux" pavilion, created by Rahul Mehrotra and Felipe Vera for the 15th *Biennale di Venezia* in 2016, and the subsequent publication by Rahul Mehrotra, Felipe Vera and José Mayoral, *Ephemeral Urbanism. Does permanent matter?* (Milan: ListLab, 2017), illustrating the work exhibited at the Biennale. *Ephemeral Urbanism* is the seminal publication on this "completely new" review of the ambiguous and "archaic" condition between the permanent and the ephemeral of human settlements. Additionally, the book is the starting point for the work performed since then by the editors of this issue of ZARCH and of its very publication.

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one goes to the shopping malls, and there are ten acres of land with parking and tarmac just lying there like archaeological sites. So, you see the redundancy. Therefore, as a society, we would say that there are some things that we can bet on like a church or a temple, which we feel will have relevance as an idea for a thousand years. But there might be other uses which we might not have the confidence, as a society, to bet on for too long, which means bringing time into our imaginary. This, then, allows you to make choices of material space, adaptability, reversibility; a whole set of other parameters emerge from this sort of thinking on the temporal scale.

At least for me, the argument through the question of temporality is to infect the debate of urban design and planning and to challenge the default condition of permanence.

The last thing related to time that I would like to talk about is the notion of transitions. My colleague, Eve Blau, talks about transitions in much more nuanced ways than I am equipped to. Her argument is that transitions happen simultaneously. These are not neat phenomena. For example, the transition of India out of socialism into capitalism takes decades. I can say this for many other countries. This has happened historically, and it will take a decade or two to transition into something and simultaneously out of something else. Therefore, time and using time to actually project when and how changes will happen, becomes very important. The second aspect of transition to which we, as designers, have not paid enough attention is, how do you design a transition? A simple example is India transitioning out of fossil fuels into renewables. You cannot make that transition overnight because the economy will collapse. Is that transition linear? You have to go nuclear to come back to renewables. So, sometimes transitions take you in completely different directions, but this makes them possible. Or you might get stuck in nuclear as a society for other reasons. And, therefore, how do we design these transitions? I would say you could use this as an example for cities. In twenty years, most of Mumbai, where about twelve million people live, is going to be underwater because of climate change. So, how do we make the transition to the safer metropolitan region on higher ground? This cannot happen overnight. So, we have to begin to develop strategies, both in academia and in practice, where we think of the future of the city. We, therefore, have to develop a vocabulary to talk about these issues. If you do not have a vocabulary, you cannot communicate, which means we cannot create a broader constituency of support not only within the profession. For example, how do you communicate these issues to a

politician? How do you communicate these issues to society more broadly? But I would underscore that when José [Mayoral] wrote to me, I was excited about these potential discussions because we are collectively making an effort to develop a vocabulary to change design thinking towards these questions.

You can think of transitions and time, for example, in a city. Why do we have permanent zoning? Should we have this in the city? I am just using numbers as an example. We should have 30% of the city where the zoning should not be more than ten years at a time so that the city can change it from commercial to residential to markets or whatever they want. So, in academia, we could do a design where we could say that, in the future, cities will have zoning for ten years. Then, if you have to design a community center for a community for ten years, what does it mean? You can make it operational in many ways. You tend to always assign for one specific condition, but that all changes.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**‘Ephemeral urbanism’ research organizes a multitude of cases in several taxonomies. It is argued that all these cases have an expiration date as a common denominator, but what exactly does the expiration date refer to? For example, in the case of the extraction of natural resources, the activity is temporary, and intrinsically linked to the length of time materials are extracted. However, the towns created adjacent to these extraction sites remain, beyond the activity. Similarly, within the taxonomy of refugee camps, there are cases that consolidate over time but do not disappear. What, then, is considered temporary? The occupation of space? The activity?**

**(RM):**

There are two ways of looking at this. We created a taxonomy in this research which is a very neat taxonomy. It looked at expiration dates, and, at that moment, it took the settlements around sites of extraction as the long duration. Everything else seemed to be very short. Now, in refugee camps, temporary has become the new permanent at least in the way that we look at it within the frame of our presentness. There are two aspects here. One, was it maybe an aberration? Maybe we got it wrong in the taxonomy, and refugee camps have to be looked at in a completely different way. But there is another way to look at it: refugee camps have now probably gone on top of extraction, because the time within which we expect to solve this refugee

challenge has become longer. It is becoming very clear that the implications go from displacement to issues of national identity. Nation states are shifting but they are like tectonic plates. They take a hundred years to shift into formation. And, therefore, refugee camps are a result of those sorts of new formations that are occurring with a breakdown in what might be those nation states. As an Indian I love to blame this on the British, who carved up the whole world in different ways, but look at all the problems that we are facing today, starting from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Palestine, Israel to everything we are dealing with. These are all boundaries that were drawn, and they seemed to have solved the problem. However, refugee camps are becoming emblematic of the resurfacing of those embedded and often ancient formations that were artificially redrawn in the last century and perhaps several times before in history. So, I think the refugee camp taxonomy is still valid, except that we put refugee camps, not the settlements for extraction, at the top of the list of the long durée.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**The Palestine camps have been there for seventy years already, and the camps in Sahara for forty-five years and in Kenya for thirty-five years. After these decades you could argue that they are permanent. What does permanence mean? How long is permanent? How long is temporary?**

**(RM):**

That only reinforces why time becomes very critical in our imagination. We should be a society making commitments on how we want to see time. If we know that refugee camps will last for two generations because these national state formations are going to take that long, we might deal with them differently.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**Maybe the infrastructure of the camp will stay, while people will move.**

**(RM):**

Exactly. Then you would actually imagine the camp as a more permanent piece of infrastructure which could allow other possibilities. And, then again, that becomes a design challenge. How do you create an armature of infrastructure which would maybe accommodate people for a short term while this strife occurs? And then it evolves into something for a long term? It is an investment that is worth making because it is land that gets occupied, and, invariably, refugee camps

are placed on land that has no other productive value for the present. Therefore, one might then think of putting these sorts of camps in places which might allow other forms of integration into other metropolitan regions. So, then, you think integrative about it. And the starting point is making a commitment of betting on how long it will take to deal with this problem that we are trying to solve.

How do we develop a vocabulary that could communicate this to a broader constituency? I do not know. I struggle with that a lot still. When I speak, you understand what I am saying. People who will read the journal will understand what we are saying, but this is not yet strong or robust and expansive enough as a vocabulary. That is a challenge for us, as academics, as well as anyone interested in ideas. How do we develop a vocabulary to be able to grapple with time, with temporality, with challenges like this? These questions of ephemerality, temporality and time will be critical to the issues that we are dealing with but those vocabularies have yet to evolve.

As an example, you could add three or four more issues to temporality. One could be temporality and climate change. Another one could be temporality and sustainability. These terms, climate change and temporality, could be everything because they have become one of these amorphous things. But if you bring temporality and climate change together, then it can get specific. If you bring sustainability and temporality together, it can get very specific. I think these broad and vague categories need to be challenged with specificity. Otherwise, everything is climate change, and, as designers, we get very disempowered. As I say to my students, and I've written about what is happening in the world today and within the profession in *Working in Mumbai,*[9] our sphere of concern is becoming beautifully articulated and very broad. But the sphere of influence is becoming smaller and smaller. So, today, students talk about social justice, inequity, diversity, human rights and climate. However, they then go on to do things in their professional lives that do not resonate with these larger challenges. While they can articulate the world's problem very beautifully and, in fact, their concerns are growing, their influence is diminishing. This mismatch causes cynicism. That also has to do with vocabulary. I think for us, as academics who train students, it is a big responsibility how we create vocabularies which will allow them to also imagine what their influence can be. Otherwise, the vocabularies that we are using

9   Rahul Mehrotra and Kate Cahill (ed.), *Working in Mumbai. Rahul Mehrotra Architects* (Berlin: Architangle, 2020).

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to describe these big and complex problems come from other disciplines, and we don't know how to make the connection or articulations of these issues in a way that would cause us to act. So, for example, if you are talking about managed retreat, we can get very specific in planning about how zoning can change over certain times so that people can get incentives to move somewhere. We can actually think more precisely.

If I had to summarize this, I would say that it is contingent upon us, as a profession and academia, to develop a precise vocabulary which can instrumentalize the notions of time and how it can be embedded in our imaginaries. But, more than that, how we can bring other ideas of transition, climate change or sustainability to formulate them more precisely around the challenges of time. And I think that, within the profession and among a younger generation, the ability to borrow language from other disciplines to describe and redescribe the crisis in which the planet is immersed is critical. We describe the movement and demography of people, issues related to climate emergency, issues related to inequity or forms of political strife very densely – but we often don't translate these into well-articulated arguments for our own action as professionals. We don't have the adequate vocabulary within our profession to see how we can respond to some of those questions.

(JC, JD, JM, JRS):

**We would like to discuss the two contexts in which you work. You are very active in North American academia through teaching and research at the GSD, while, at the same time, your primary interests on architecture, conservation and urban planning stem from India. How do these two worlds feed into each other?**

(RM):

I move between these two contexts which gives me distance from each context. It has given me a fantastic luxury to be able to reflect for which I feel blessed. I practice in India. I am on the ground. I am at building sites. I travel and see conditions and watch them change. I talk to people and discern the pulse on the ground. Then I get to Boston and, while it feels distant, it allows me to synthesize these observations. And the same thing happens the other way round. I think that ability for us to distance ourselves from a problem, a condition or a context is always very productive.

The other thing is that it also makes you learn and understand through vivid contrast. As they say, in every first world city, there is a third world city, and in every third world city, there is a first

world city. But essentially the problems are not dissimilar. Within an understanding of time and history, you see them differently. You can already see that America's foundations have been shaken. There are forms of very acute inequity which, in India, is very evident on the street, but which, in the United States, is evident neighborhood by neighborhood. Its formation is different, its physical manifestation is different. It is a big wake-up call and a reality check which allows you to see value where inequity collides in space. You also see the problems where inequity does not collide in space that you do not recognize. So, there are many lessons that I feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to see thanks to the distance. I see the problems of the world as being very similar, but they manifest themselves very differently. You get different illusions of a city and its identity. For example, you go to Mumbai and suddenly get flashes that you are in Manhattan, but then you go one mile down and it is a different world. The same thing applies in America. You travel through some neighborhoods where you cannot believe the poverty and then you come, in contrast, to another glitzy neighborhood. And, again, space and how we understand its formation matters. I mean, it has huge implications. Finally, architecture and cities really tell you what society is, because cities are merely the physical manifestation of the aspirations, problems and the challenges that any society faces.

(JC, JD, JM, JRS):

**Both your practice and your academic work are extensive and rich, with multiple publications, research and built works. How has the 'ephemeral urbanism' research altered or influenced your practice or vice versa? How does your theoretical work on the 'ephemeral' and 'kinetic' relate to your own work?**

(RM):

I think one is very conscious about the fact that one goes beyond and blurs binary in articulating the problems that surround us or to simply understand the world. For me, I see it as a complete blur. Yes, I teach at Harvard University and I have my practice in Mumbai. Both are different worlds, but there is a real continuity. One doesn't do this consciously when one is doing these things, but, with reflection, you see the pattern. The most important thing that I have learned in retrospect is that practice teaches you to embrace a problem without any preconceptions. Of course, ideas carry, but you're suddenly given a project and you jump into it. We are 'problem solvers', and design is synthetic. We look at resolving the contestations of differing forces, we come up with something of a solution.

For me, research has been like that. José [Mayoral], you've been part of it and you will, I hope, attest to it. We had no preconception when we went to the 'Kumbh Mela'.[10] We just knew this was fascinating and this was a question worth looking at. And then, from that came the theorizing or the framing of 'ephemeral urbanism', as well as the taxonomy. It was such an out-of-the-box problem, and it allowed great interdisciplinary or rather transdisciplinary conversations because no one discipline had a preconception, nor, for that matter, were there any precedents to pick up the problem. The public health students who came with us were as clueless as the design students or the religion students. The religion students were perhaps the most equipped to understand the festival because it is a religious festival. I think true interdisciplinarity comes from the fact that the problem is out of the box enough that no discipline leads the way in finding the solution, and the 'Kumbh Mela' was a big learning experience. The lesson that has stayed with me, even for my pedagogy and my academic work is: how does one set problems for students to learn from where you don't go into the problem with the preconception? Otherwise, it is very limiting because we, then, have many instruments and methods often developed in other situations and conditions that we just impulsively apply? For me, research is a form of practice and practice a form of research. Therefore, there was no binary there in my mind. I don't see myself as an academic. I see myself as a practitioner, and research is a form of practice just like making buildings is a form of practice.

Even talking about vocabularies, the word practice itself is about practicing. What do tennis players do? They practice, they repeat things and master the ordinary rhythms, then that allows them to innovate. In some ways, it comes instinctively, in others, it doesn't. I think the only way one should judge practice today is through its rigor of engagement, which is a very critical aspect. Otherwise, practices just become mechanistic. For example, you can get a good forehand shot as a tennis player and only use that forehand. But the genius tennis players are the ones who can shift around, innovate on the spot, see an opportunity and jump in in a completely unimagined way. This is what practice is supposed to be about. We have to see it more broadly in that way, allowing room for other things to be accommodated rather than dividing categories of teaching, research and practice. These cannot be seen as diametrically

opposite. If you start seeing teaching as a form of practice, you will engage with the profession in a different way.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**Your research on 'ephemeral urbanism' covers many fronts: from the physical deployment of these temporary occupations to their flexible governance structure in the 'Kumbh Mela'. What are other possible paths of investigation that this research has opened up and are still to be explored for other academics?**

**(RM):**

I believe there are three aspects that came out of the 'Kumbh Mela' and the 'ephemeral urbanism' research project which have great potential for another generation to pick up as a problem. One is about creating a vocabulary around the notion of time and, by extension, the idea of the ephemeral as being instrumental as an urban design tool and understanding all this better. What is the rhythm of time? How should we understand the notion of reversibility? What is the notion of a long or short expiration date? How can one introduce a vocabulary that can embrace time or use time instinctively as we practice? The second area that the 'Kumbh Mela' opened up, which we did not explore for various reasons, is the notion of material geographies. That means where materials come from and where they get re-absorbed into the system. If we think of a cyclic economy, every material has a geography in terms of where it is produced or extracted, where it gets embedded and where it could find another life. The notion of material geographies is something the 'Kumbh Mela', at least in my mind, opened up, and I see it as a great potential for scholars in the future. And the third one, the temporal scale of the governance mechanism, which was discovered at the 'Kumbh Mela', is the least known among the work but was, in many ways, very most exciting. The one year of planning for the 'Kumbh Mela' starts with the chief minister of the State and the highest government officials. Every few months, the hierarchy changes, and, three months before the festival, the person in charge is the mayor who has to report only to one or two people. This uses time in a wonderful way even for governance structures and that makes it very nimble. If you think about it, more than the buildings, the legacy that usually lasts the longest in most cities is this governance structure: the mayoral system and the hierarchy of how the House is elected. Buildings change, but usually governance systems only change in any dramatic way over very long durées. In today's world, we are not nimble enough in our governance structure. We should

10   This refers to the trip that Mehrotra made with Harvard GSD students in 2014 to study *Kumbh Mela*.

have a governance structure that shifts if there's a crisis in the city so that somebody else, who can solve the problem, takes responsibility, instead of the mayor, who is elected by politicians and cannot respond to this crisis. The governance structure in the 'Kumbh Mela' shifted on a temporal scale. And again, we mapped it, but we did not investigate its potential enough. And I think this could be a very key aspect in urban planning, going back to how one could embed time in our imaginaries. This is one way one could imagine time being productively used or instrumentally used to even think of new governance structures that operate and get privileged and have hierarchies based on time rhythms. We have to bring that language into the urban planning and design debate. These are the three or four things that I think have great potential for scholarship in the future.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**To conclude, we would like to ask you, what is next? Are you interested in exploring any of these topics that you just mentioned such as material geography or flexible governance? Your research has gone from the kinetic city in Mumbai to ephemeral urbanism in the 'Kumbh Mela'. What is next in your research trajectory? Within this field of study, is there any other branch that you are currently investigating or planning to investigate?**

**(RM):**

After this research, I started working on a book with Sourav Biswas, a former student who has been in practice for a decade, which I hope I will have out by the end of this year. It is called *Becoming Urban*. And it actually takes many of these ideas but looks at India's urbanization trajectory in a more scientific and precise way. It basically challenges the way the government defines towns and what parameters they use. In India right now there are three parameters that define what is urban and what is rural. For being urban, you have to have a population of more than five thousand people, a density of over four hundred people per square kilometer, and seventy-five per cent of the male population in the city has to be in non-agricultural employment. If more than 75% of the male population is doing something besides agriculture, then it is an urban area. Basically, we are challenging those three parameters. Here we come back to where we started: the idea of time and temporality. We know that, in many parts of India, people do agriculture for three months and work in urban areas for another three months. Three hundred million people in India go back and forth on a seasonal basis. So, that's a whole new way of imagining the urban.

Therefore, we call the book *Becoming Urban,* which is an analysis through these lenses of the notion of temporality — time and space. One is looking at what urban India actually is. That's the question. What is urban? What does urban mean? Because I believe the urban/rural binary is redundant, and we have to nuance that discussion in a completely different way. So, we are finding and creating categories where we are identifying thousands of places, which we are calling transitioning settlements. These have all the characteristics of urban, but they have not transitioned yet into the urban due to some of the government criteria. And we are creating another kind of taxonomy to look at all of urban India, and, in a sense, it builds on the earlier research of the 'kinetic urbanism' and the 'ephemeral urbanism' taxonomies. But here we take census data and try to map these places more precisely.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**In relation to these points that you made, we wanted to ask you, is a camp a city? What kind of parameters can define cities?**

**(RM):**

It is a complicated mix of planning and political parameters. For example, density becomes important because the infrastructure engineers must design water and sewage. There are many different parameters that you have to feed into it. But, as you were speaking, I thought of one more idea which relates to the problem with formality, informality, the camp and the city. Actually, if you think about it, we carry a very deep aesthetic bias as architects and planners. I will give you an example of what I mean. Marc Angélil from the ETH[11] was telling me how they taught studios and then wrote books on Ethiopia. They wanted to study informal settlements in Ethiopia, so they went to Addis Ababa and looked more precisely at the outskirts of Addis Ababa. They selected an informal settlement, which they studied for ten days. For eight days, they did measure drawings and photographic documentation, and they kept the last two days for interviews.

If an anthropologist or a sociologist had done this, they'd have done eight days of interviews and two days of photography, but they did it the other way. Architects wanted to capture the aesthetics of the play. However, in the first interview, they realized it wasn't an informal settlement. It was

11   This refers to the Department of Architecture at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich —ETH Zurich— where Marc Angélil is currently professor emeritus.

an official government settlement, but it just looked like an informal settlement. It was a formal part of the city. This is an example of an aesthetic bias. What I'm trying to say is that a lot of our discussions about temporality, about the camp, about the camp and the city and those binaries, actually comes from an aesthetic bias. We call it a 'camp' if it looks like a camp, we see the informal city if it looks like an informal city. This deep aesthetic bias is really related to what I said earlier about the need for a more robust vocabulary for our emerging urban condition. How do we create vocabularies that become filters for us to not sustain these biases? So, we need to change the framing of questions so that time will be embedded in our discussions, and temporality will be allowed to play a productive and instrumental role. There is a whole range of biases that we have perpetuated in the profession.

**(JC, JD, JM, JRS):**

**At the end of the last century, the emergence of digital and wireless networks inspired a large series of reflections and publications that called into question some of the deeply rooted certainties of urban discourse over the preceding two decades, including, first and foremost, the need to focus on more stable, closely knit urban fabrics in the belief that they would be better able to build political and common living spaces with more physical and compact ties. Mehrotra's work and writings have, as revealed in this conversation, shaped a surprisingly rich vision which feeds off urban and vital reality. This vision is neither permanent, nor ephemeral —or is both at the same time— and is likely to move increasingly closer to a position of ambivalence, which we, as architects and designers, do not yet know how to negotiate, but which Mehrotra is able to spell out.**

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PRÁCTICA was founded by Jaime Daroca [PRÁCTICA], José Mayoral [PRÁCTICA] and José Ramón Sierra [PRÁCTICA] during their time at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Their extensive international experience in Switzerland, the UK, the USA, Chile and Spain, and their collaboration with offices such as Herzog & de Meuron, David Chipperfield Architects, Rafael Moneo, e2a Architects, Tod Williams Billie Tsien, Sergison Bates Architects and Ábalos-Sentkiewicz, gives them a global vision in projects of different scales and programmes. The founders of PRÁCTICA studied architecture at the Technical Schools of Madrid and Seville (ETSAM and ETSAS) and obtained a Master of Architecture from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. They continue to play an active academic role through teaching and research at Harvard University GSD, Columbia University GSAPP, the Catholic University of Chile and the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, California. PRÁCTICA has grown to become a diverse and multidisciplinary team of professionals, with experts in architecture, urbanism and design from many parts of the world. Their different perspectives and experiences contribute to building a stimulating design environment that generates creative and unexpected responses. PRÁCTICA's work has been exhibited and published in various international institutions such as the MoMA in New York, the Venice, Spain and Chile Architecture Biennials, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Columbia University GSAPP, and the University of Seville among others.