

# Spatial Anomalies

## Effects of effects of localisation in the informal restructuring of globally planned edge cities -The case of Newtown, Rajarhat

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### Abstract

*Since the dawn of liberalisation in India, Indian cities have been shifting their economic base from a secondary economy to a tertiary economy. This shift in the economy resulted in the creation of various economic growth centres and the formation of new townships along the peripheries for faster capital capture. This led to large privatisation of land and infrastructure and therefore a drive for creating a world-class global image began (Mehrotra, 2008), restructuring cities into paradigms necessitating segregation between the global and local population. This privatised vision led to the creation of such a socio-spatial structure that does not accommodate the local population, living there for generations. The Northeastern peripheral expansion of Kolkata, initiated by the Left Front Government in the 90's post liberalisation of the economy, and influenced greatly by private developers and the entry of the private sector in the housing sector, has been facilitated through violent erasures, expropriation of agricultural land, dispossessions and displacements that underwrite the production of the periphery as spaces of urban consumption, living and working. The city of Kolkata historically had gone through segregated planning mechanisms, yet has shown greater flexibility and adaptability in achieving inclusiveness ultimately leading to spatial hybridity or grey zones. This paper aims to investigate the anomalies or spatial hybridity in the post-planning scenarios of Newtown, Rajarhat. The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part focuses on the cultural and socio-spatial interdependencies between the global and local populations and also across different classes of people. This part also explores the idea of how local culture overrides the principles of global city planning. The second part explores the government and civil society's role in strengthening the interdependency between the global and the local population. Here, national and state-driven urbanisation schemes are critically examined which has resulted in certain socioeconomic interdependencies. The last part of this paper looks at the overall spatial structure of Newtown Rajarhat through the lens of ephemeral urbanism. This section will highlight how evictions led by government and private authorities result in further anomalies in the spatial structure of this area. Temporality or ephemeral urban spatiality plays a major role as a coping mechanism against such evictions. Therefore, the overall attempt of this paper is to highlight such spatial anomalies as signs of inclusive development which emerges as a reaction against the rigid framework of globally planned cities.*

## Keywords

*Indian cities, Global City planning, Inclusive urbanism, Ephemeral Urbanism,.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Since the dawn of liberalisation in India, Indian cities have been shifting their economic base from a secondary economy to a tertiary economy. This shift in economy resulted in the creation of various economic growth centres and the formation of new townships along the peripheries for faster capital capture. This led to large privatisation of land and infrastructure and therefore a drive for creating a world class image began, to transform the city into a global entity. (Mehrotra, 2008)

The North eastern peripheral expansion of Kolkata, initiated by the Left Front Government in the 90's post liberalisation of the economy, and influenced greatly by private developers and the entry of the private sector in the housing sector, has been facilitated through violent erasures, expropriation of agricultural land, dispossessions and displacements that underwrite the production of the periphery as spaces of urban consumption, living and working. WBHIDCO (1999) with the objective of decongesting Kolkata through the creation of a satellite city and to provide housing and planned urban infrastructure across different socio-economic segments of populations. Newtown has been infused with informal modes of services to fill up the existing infrastructural gaps yet does not find representation in the masterplan or the overall development. (Kundu, 2016)

The city of Kolkata, historically had gone through segregated planning mechanisms, yet has shown greater flexibility and adaptability in achieving inclusiveness ultimately leading to spatial hybridity and grey spaces. (Mitra, 2011) This spatial hybridity has been facilitated by certain design flexibilities whether it's the wider footpaths of Gariahat or private arcades of grand hotels which became the public arcade of the city. These have further defined Kolkata's publicness and collective identity of the city. The design norms and regulations of Newtown-Rajarhat on the other hand does not facilitate such flexible planning and design mechanisms, therefore challenging the essential spatial qualities of Kolkata which makes it a vibrant, inclusive and diversified city.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Mercuse and Kemper (2000) postulates that global capitalism has brought forth the manifestation of a new world order which has given rise to a new urban spatial order. Globalisation has had a visible effect on the entire structure of the cities which resulted in a more generalised and efficient urban form associated with globalising cities. The post Fordist changes have included the rise of 'high level' international business services, the decline of manufacturing and a reduction of the welfare state. The new post Fordist spatial order exhibits increasing spatial divisions or 'quartering' of the city between elite citadels, new locations of the bourgeoisie class, a suburban city, a tenement city and an abandoned city. The world has seen the creation of new cities which are built from scratch due to this new restructuring of cities led by global capitalism. This phenomenon in new cities reveals a variety of new actors and new configurations of state power involved in the development of new cities. The newly planned cities reveal new scales and modes of entrepreneurial urbanism in which the resident is increasingly treated as a customer and consumer,

rather than as a citizen, and many new cities are treated by elites as spaces of investment, rather than prioritised as places to live. (Moser and Côté-Roy, 2021)

Mehrotra (2012) talks about how India since it opened up its economy in the 90's gave rise to new city building which ignored the realities of India. He starts with the notion of 'weapon of mass construction' coined by Arjuna Appadurai, which are new infrastructures – the way they are deployed are largely in the interest of the elite society resulting in greater exclusion of the poor. Globalisation has brought glamour to Indian cities along with displacement, in the form of building state of the art airports and automobile-oriented industries that led to the creation of gated communities on the peripheries of the city. Instead, they ignored investing in basic urban infrastructure like water systems, public health and education infrastructure. The peripheries where the global capital sits also creates a bridge to intermix the global elites with the local subaltern cultures (Huysen, 2008). Mehrotra (2008) argues that a new 'bazaar like urbanism' has formed because of such economic trajectories and social transactions. It is created by those who are located outside the domains of the state driven formal modes of spatial production. Indian cities today consist of both the 'static city' formed by the formal spatial production by the state and the 'kinetic city' which is informal, elastic and mobile in nature. (Mehrotra, 2008)

The city of Kolkata, since the 90's has also gone through similar trajectories of city restructuring, rise of new city extensions at the peripheries and the exclusion of the local urban poor. This has created contested domains of streets, open spaces, lakes, leading to forms of dominance of certain groups over the others. On one hand this contested domain brings people closer to each other, while on the other, due to the nature of contestation it brings in domination of weaker groups by the stronger ones (Roy, 2002). Chakravorty (2000) describes that Kolkata's economy and spatially divided urban structure was shaped after the first globalising force of colonialism. During the post-colonial era, Kolkata's economy became more internally focused, lost part of its hinterland and received a large influx of rural migrants. Only recently, Kolkata regained its global economic connections and began to attract post Fordist production. Unlike western cities, flexible production has always been the norm in Kolkata and the informal sector has comprised more than forty percent of the labour force. The recent trend that is aligned to the new urban spatial order paradigm is the creation of industrial towns in the peripheries of Kolkata. Chakravorty (2000), suggests that these new industrial towns might come to resemble post-industrial cities where there will be huge drives for cleanliness, spaciousness and free of visible signs of poverty and informality. These new townships or which the author calls it as "New Calcutta" are clearly designed for professional upper-income earners. Therefore, the image of new Calcutta will be similar to a post-industrial city (in the context of the US – example Charlotte, North Carolina) which will be clean, spacious and free of visible poverty.

### 3. Methodology

The overall research has been an investigation of urban spatiality and its structural characteristics is seen through various theoretical lenses such as ephemeral urbanism, everyday urbanism, production of social space and right to the city. The primary study has been carried out in the form of visual observation in Action Area 1 which was the first area to be completely developed in Newtown, Rajarhat. Studies based on land ownership, socio spatial and economic interdependencies and temporality of space has been done in order to understand and highlight the anomalies happening on ground as opposed to the planning norms and regulations. State level economic and urbanisation schemes are discussed in order to understand its impact on the people who are in the process of such spatial anomalies.

### 4. Planning of Newtown, Rajarhat

#### 4.1. Economic trajectories in Kolkata since 1990.

The emergence of the EM bypass in the early 80's acting as a new economic corridor to the city was more instrumental in the later years which attracted a large investment in the domain of real estate and IT-BPO and further connecting the city to the NSCB Airport. It also accelerated the growth in the north eastern periphery of the city mainly for the development of Newtown Rajarhat.

Due to the emergence of various economic centres along this corridor, there has been a heavy influx of higher and lower economic groups of people who are engaged in both the formal and the informal economic sector respectively.

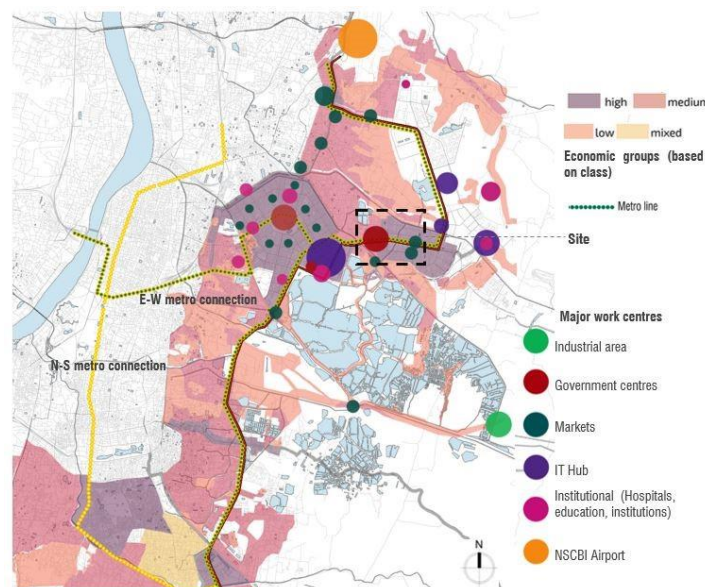


Figure 1: Economic centres at the periphery. Source : Author

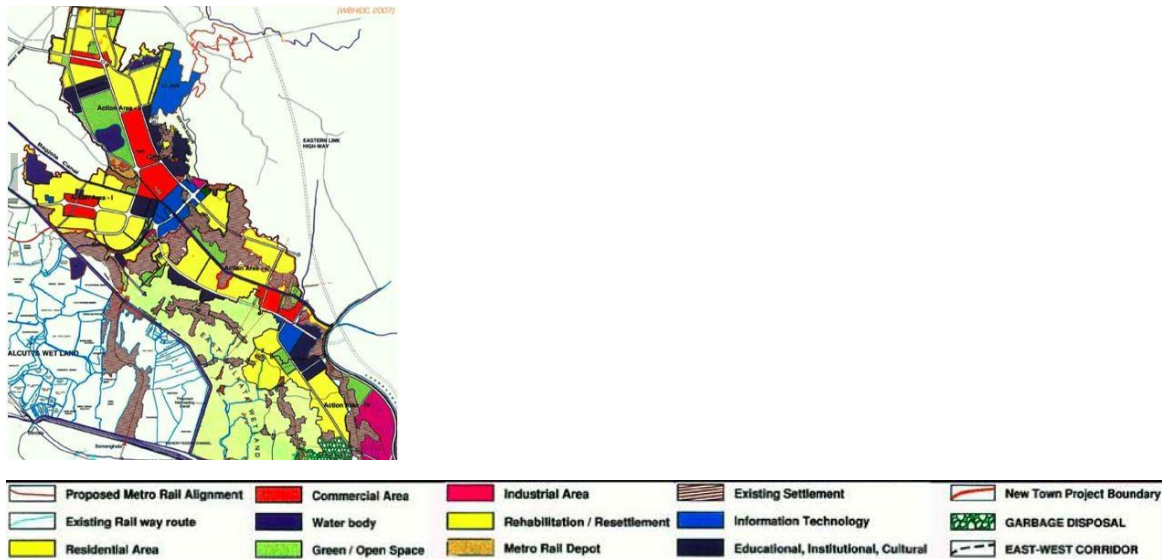


Figure 2: Land use plan of Newtown Rajarhat (2014)

The main planning objectives were to establish new business centre to reduce the mounting pressure on the existing, establish new business centre to reduce the mounting pressure on the existing Central Business Districts (CBD) and Increasing housing stock supply by creating new residential units.

The Sub CBD area would include office complexes, headquarters and / or regional offices of banks, insurance companies, financial institutions, hotel complex, shopping complex, major cultural complex and commercial - recreational facilities.

#### 4.2. Spatial structure of the static city.

Newtown is divided into 3 action areas and a CBD in the middle. The action areas constitute commercial (global) footprint as oppose to the egalitarian sector based model of Salt Lake, which comprises of institutions and administrative centres as its core. The action areas are broken down into several blocks and a sub CBD as its core, connected by secondary roads all around.



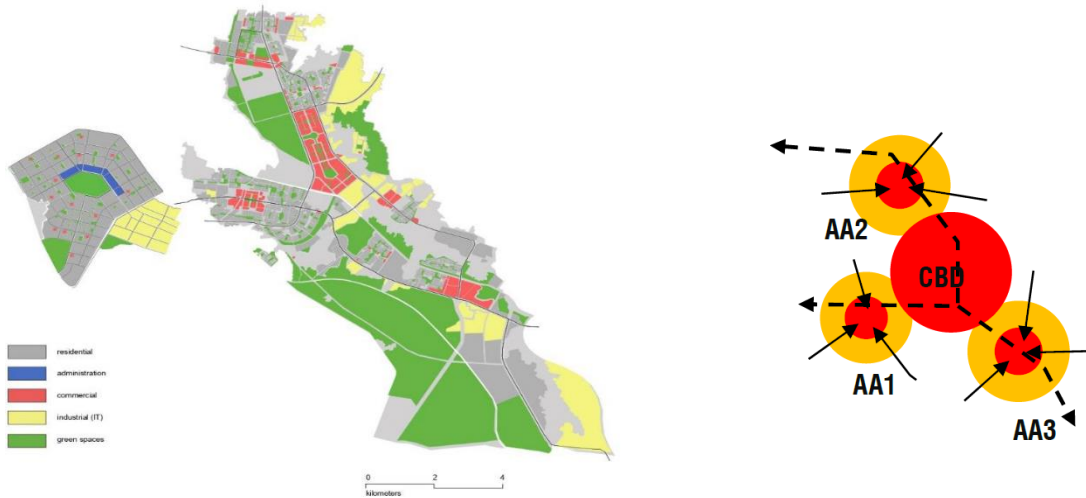


Figure 3: Socialist model (Salt Lake) vs Neoliberal model (Newtown Rajarhat). Source : Kolkata east side story, ETH Basel, 2008

Figure 4: Diagram depicting the relationship between the CBD area with the action areas. Source : Author

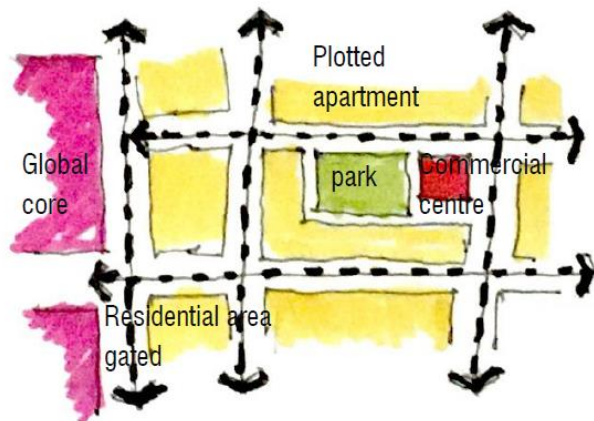


Figure 5: Block structure. Source: Author

The block comprises of a community commercial centre adjacent to a park and surrounded by residential (plotted apartment, cooperative housing, gated communities, plotted single family residential). It is then connected to a Sub CBD which majorly contains large shopping malls, hotels, offices, etc. This idea of locating amenities at the core nurtures the idea of segregated living.

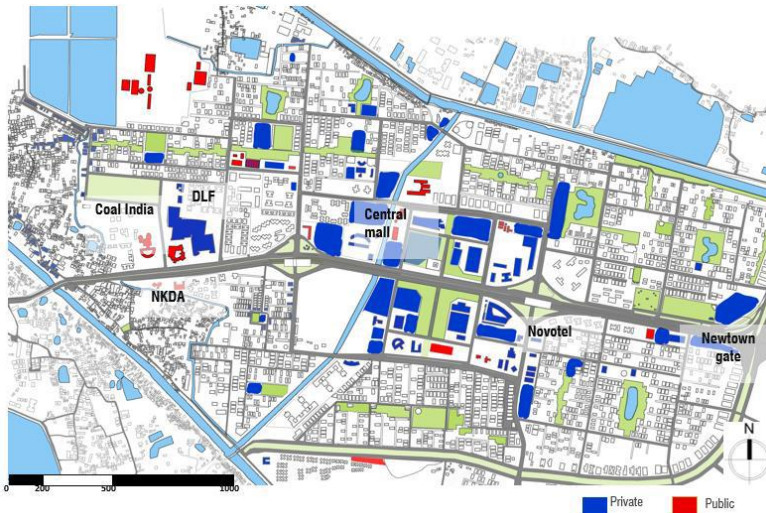


Figure 6: Map showing the private is to public nature of socio-physical spaces in AA1. Source : Author

Although the masterplan has adopted some of the principles from the sector based model where the school, market and playground becomes the internal part of the community residing in that sector but the private nature of social amenities of each block in Newtown makes it extrovert as it will have its own catchment at the same time exclusionary of lower income group people. The parks are the only open public spaces where people across all social groups can come.

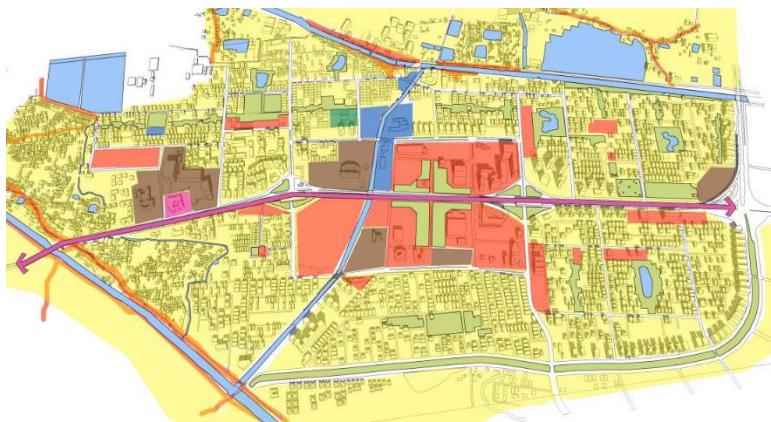


Figure 7: Map showing the functional distribution and built-up areas in AA1. Source : Author

The functional distribution of commercial and institutional areas are primarily along to the arterial road (Biswa Bangla Sarani) and neighborhood level commercial centres are placed in the middle of the residential blocks connected by sub-arterial and local roads.

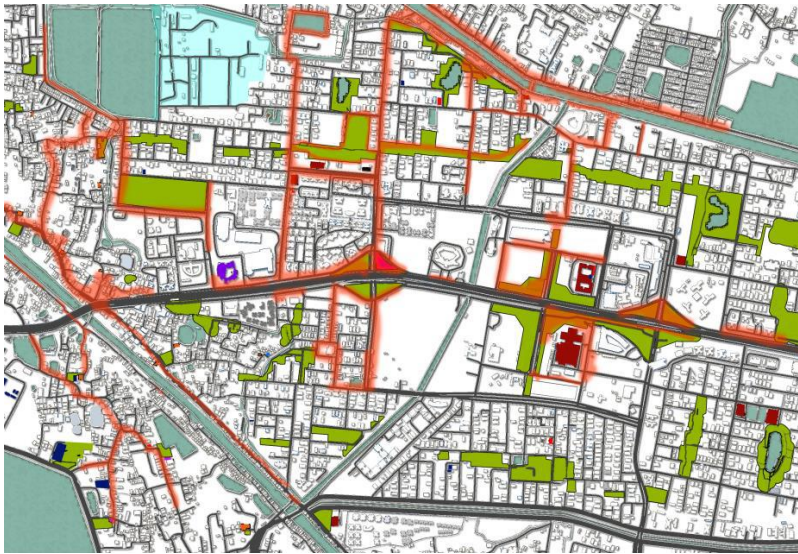


Figure 8: Map showing intensity of activity (Night time) . Source : Author

The secondary or sub arterial/ local streets connecting the residential areas to the global core and the nearby urban villages have the highest number of footfall specially after 5 P.M. These streets are usually filled up with rows of informal commercial shacks which provide daily needs/ products needed for the residential area.

## 5. Spatial anomaly (as a result of the kinetic city)

### 5.1. Socio-economic interdependency

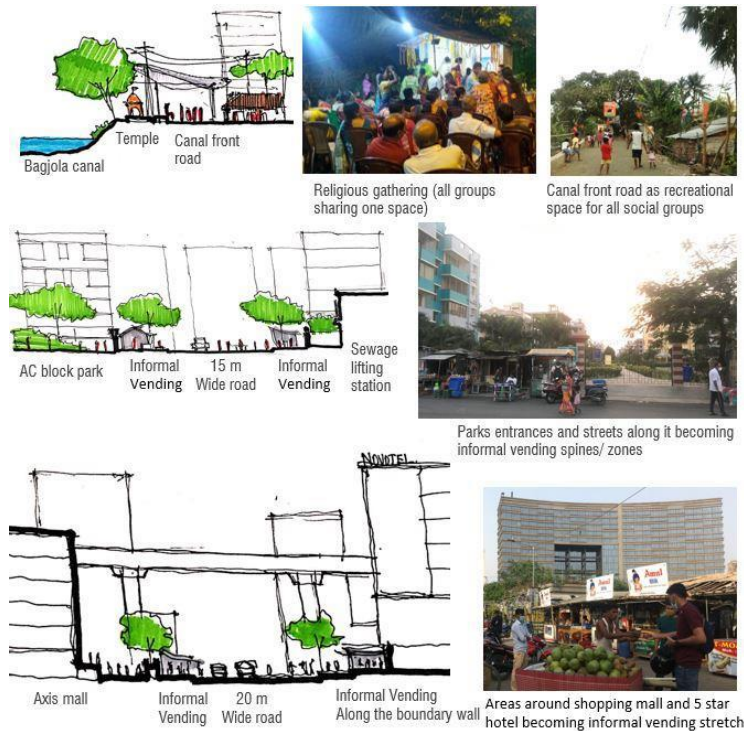


Figure 9: Section and views to depict socio spatial interdependency. Source : Author



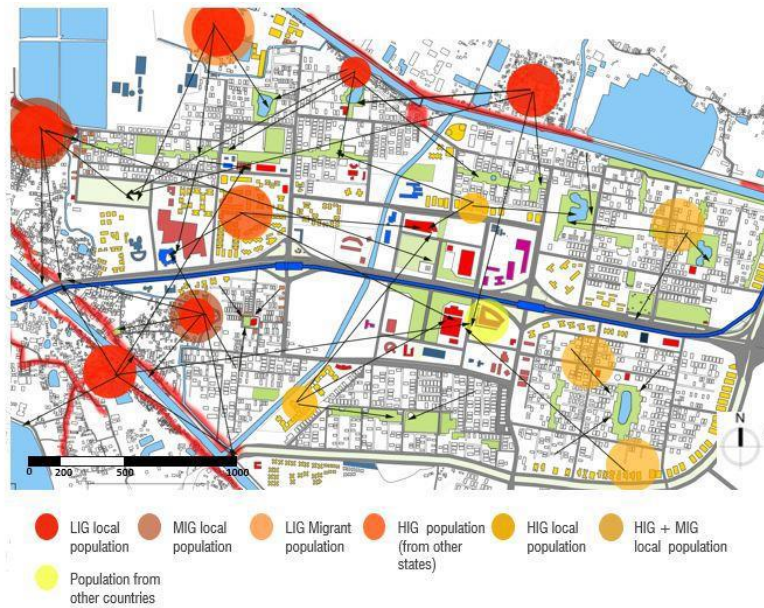


Figure 10: Map showing area level interdependency networks. Source : Author

It is seen that Action area 1 of Newtown has a large catchment of population from the surrounding areas due to the nature of work centres and the kind of population residing in this area. In the area level, the sub-CBD area caters mostly to the global population who come from outside the state and the country. (Referring to figure no. - ) Whereas, the smaller pockets of open spaces and the informal vending stretches are inhabited both by the surrounding local lower and the middle-income population.

Figure no.10 gives a vivid detail of the spatial conditions formed as a result of socio-economic interdependency. It is often seen that cultural associates overrides the socio-economic segregation which has been found in the case of any religious events, where all economic and social groups come together to celebrate it. In the natural edge formed along the canal front acts an informal recreational space for all to come together. It is also seen that the entry gates of parks, edges of shopping malls and local roads connecting the residential areas with the arterial and sub arterial road acting as informal shopping spines where the people belonging to the upper economic strata are dependent on for their daily needs. Hence these spaces become containers of everydayness. In the final scenario, the construction gets completed in the vacant plot and boundary wall comes up. Because of this, the housing unit completely shifts to the road, making it a continuous commercial spine. The informal unit works as a shaded vending unit at the same time a space to rest at night. This informal unit also provides continuous shade all throughout the street making it even easier for pedestrians to move smoothly during day and activates the street.

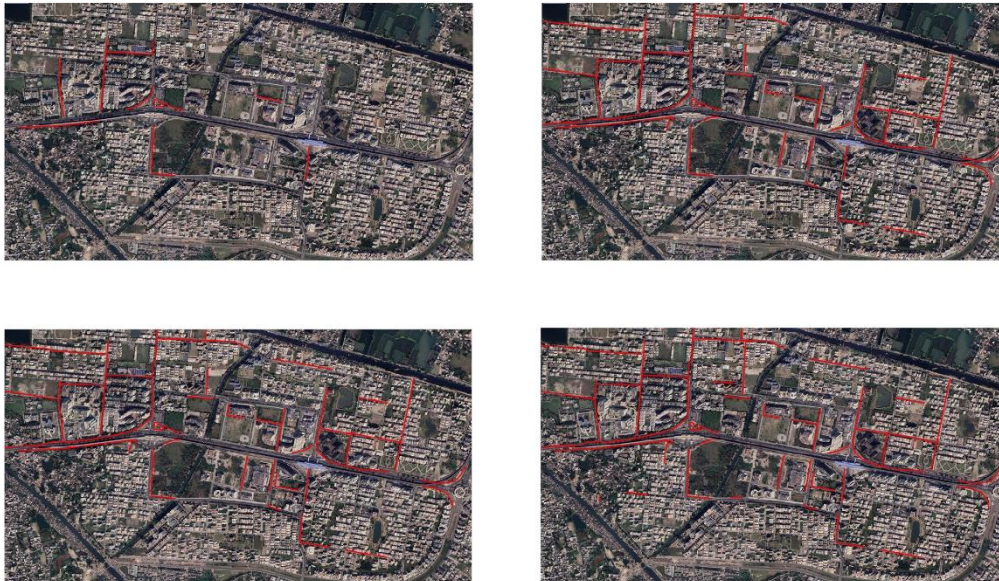


Figure 11 : Additions over the years. Source : Google Earth pro

In order to maintain a world class image of the city and to make it a clean city, the state comes and evicts such informal commercial spines. As a result of this, the vendors shift their unit to other streets. This ultimately changes the overall spatial structure of the place which keeps on changing with time and ephemeral in nature. Drawing the idea of ephemeral urbanism by Mehrotra (2017), it is inferred that this transformation of space and time acts a coping mechanism against the consequences of urban evictions.

## 5.2. Role of state driven economic and urbanization schemes

With the onset of the genesis of Newtown Rajarhat, the existing villages which has been engulfed in the development process according to LUDCP, there has been a major change in the livelihood pattern from agrarian to non-agrarian specifically non skilled which has increased the work participation. Although the work opportunity available in the planned area are of low return earning (Khatun and Sivaramakrishnan, 2019). In such a condition, the state government has created a corporation - 'SWAROJGAR' scheme for assisting self-help groups to substantially increase their employability. This will help in the creation of SHGs from the villages engulfed inside the rapidly increasing urban areas and from nearby rural villages. This has a potential of equal distribution of essential commodities to the marginalized population at the same time increasing their scope of work.

On the other hand, larger central and state level urbanization schemes such as West Bengal Green City Mission and Smart City Mission proposal with the aim of creating a livable environment has resulted in massive displacement and mass evictions of people who are engaged the informal economic sector. This also increases the probability of intense digital surveillance in the area to create a more hostile environment for the marginalized.

### 5.3. Ephemeral urbanism as a coping mechanism for urban evictions

Mehrotra (2008) postulates that the elastic and temporal nature both in its form and structure of the kinetic city has often been used as a mode to avoid the impacts of urban evictions. Such a scenario can be seen in the urban structure of Newtown, Rajarhat.

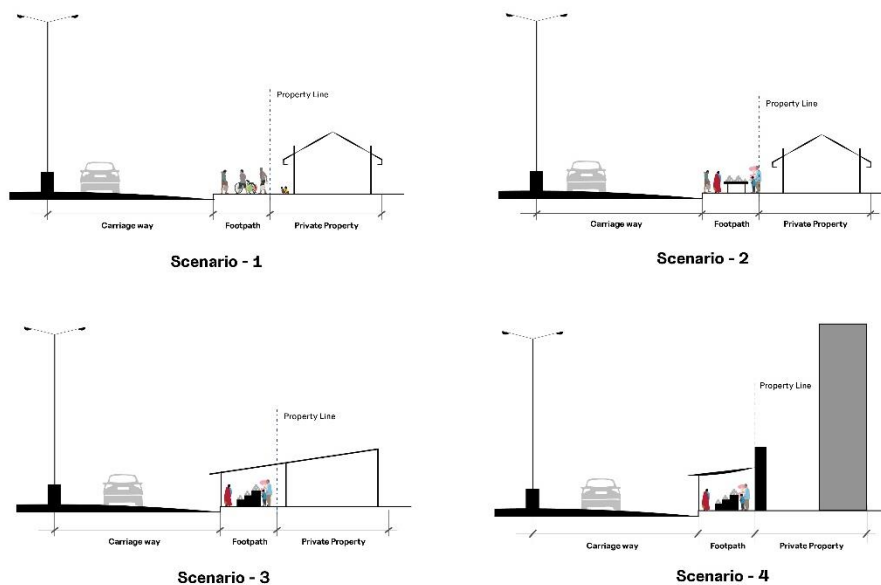


Figure 12: Diagrams showing the transformation of a street along a vacant plot into a vibrant informal commercial spine. Source : Author

Street vending is a source of income and livelihood for many urban poor, as well as an important source of information for the general public. In the first scenario, the section depicts the construction workers' informal housing unit building along the edge of the property line interfacing with the street. The path becomes a setting for interaction, tea, and cooking. In the second scenario, the image focuses on how the workers encroach the footpath area and utilizing as a vending zone. This is resulting in a linear vending zone along the street. In the third scenario, the workers hut morphing into the footpath zone becomes establishing the whole street as a bazaar. The portion which comes within the private property is acting as the place of rest. In the final scenario, the construction gets completed in the vacant plot and boundary wall comes up. Because of this, the housing unit completely shifts to the road, making it a continuous commercial spine.

## 6. Conclusion

According to Cambridge dictionary, the word anomaly means a person or thing that is different from what is usual, or not in agreement with something else and therefore not satisfactory. The main intention of this paper was to investigate the anomalies of space in reality which are at times not in agreement to the formal planning visions of the state. Here the anomaly in planning is not just seen as an opposition to normative planning rather it is also aids in where planning cannot reach or does not get formally manifested in ground reality. It is seen both as a glitch in the system at the same time a glue to join a broken system or fragmented

structures. Drawing ideas from Production of Space by Henri Lefebvre such as dialectics of space and to give a much more meaningful connotation, Spatial anomaly is being used instead of planning anomaly.

Normative planning schemes is held responsible for the production of the static city which not necessarily caters to a wider mass but at the same time acts as triggers for generating the kinetic city. The fundamental question thus formed is, can or should the spatial anomalies be planned or designed or totally neglected? Mehrotra argues that there needs to be a simultaneous validity of both the static and the kinetic city highlighting its co-existence (Mehrotra, 2008).

The spatial structure of Kolkata has always been a critical site for inclusivity even if it's planning or design intention was not intended to create such environment. This has been a result of such spatial anomalies. The fundamental question of this paper was to prove if spatial anomalies create a more equitable and livable environment for the people residing in this city. Whether it is in the case where cultural associations breaking the divide between economic polarities or transformation of inactive edges along vacant plots (which are usually unsafe to go through), ultimately providing a platform for people to come together. Thus, challenging the normative attitude of state-based planning in the neoliberal era.

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