Durga Puja in Kolkata - urban Transformation in the City Design Ideas, Art, Architecture and Culture

Anjan Mitra[1], Madhumita Roy[2]

[1] Architect – Urban Designer

[1] Professor – Department of Architecture, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 700 032

ABSTRACT

Deconstructing Durga Puja in Kolkata helps one comprehend *Temporality* as a process of encoding human experiences into ordinary routine existences – infusing meaning and creating a way to envisage the extraordinary. Temporal Spaces therefore present a multifaceted design opportunity to create and sustain the cultural expression and actions of a community. These represent universal values and highlight the intangible cultural heritage through place making, superimposed with appropriate image construction and embedded symbolism.

Public events are the key to the life of a city. They can also be identified as temporal acts that occur for a short duration of time but creates and sustains the memory of the city's association involving Space, Culture and Time. This evolved relationship lends the city its unique 'cityness' and is therefore best understood as a cultural narrative of the city.

Durga Puja is such a Public Event that takes place in Autumn in the city of Kolkata and its suburbs. The basic notion of a society lies in its collective imagination about concepts and ideas related to Human existence, their relationship with nature, environment, beliefs, faiths and values. While ordinary life is about individual existence and its daily sustenance, the actual meaning in life lies in its celebration with others in various forms manifested in Public events. The Public Event, therefore, always has a narrative. These narratives associate with myth, mythology, symbolism, collective purpose and is reinforced through rituals and practices to ensure public engagement. Public events are essentially an extra ordinary temporal experience to explore happiness, delight, hope and overcome the mundane. This phenomenon is like 'Heterotropia". This intangible experience is created through the tangible aspects of human expressions in its Art, Architecture, Art installation and image making. They also help to sustain other intangible aspects like shared values, aesthetics, cultural traditions, ritualistic practices, sacred realisations, empathy and re-establishes their connectedness to mother nature. This paper deconstructs the Durga puja event for its cultural narrative to understand its motivation and opportunity for public engagement and paves the way to celebrate life in its entirety, embracing the essence of public life in the city.

[1] Architect – Urban Designer

[2] Professor – Department of Architecture, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 700 032

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Introduction

The *Durga Puja* festival has created thousands of Puja pandals every year transforming the image of the city - a characteristic unique to Kolkata. These transformations are temporary and last for four days although their engagement with city space is about of two months (including preparation to dismantling). Interestingly this physical pattern replicates every year though their presentation or their image varies. This phenomenon posed a general enquiry of place-making and space-making in a city to accommodate a public event, exploring its relations to the city's culture and society. This temporary urban transformation is a unique occurrence for hosting a particular public event specific to the culture of the city. It is therefore necessary to understand the nature of the public event, its relation to city culture and the emotive power that it garners to generate and motivate large-scale public engagement across class, religion, gender, demography, and political aspirations. This intangible heritage of Kolkata is a unique cultural phenomenon that is spatially, artistically, and architecturally manifested through temporarily generated public places appropriating and transforming the existing public-private domain. (Fig.1A,1B,1C,1D,1E,1F)

Fig.1A – Nabin Palli, Hatibagan

Located in a street behind Hatibagan bazaar (an area occupied by the lower middle-class and informal settlements), this puja was awarded the best puja of Kolkata in the year 2011. The theme was highlighting the weaving community.

Fig.1B – Nabin Palli, Hatibagan

Provision for entrances for entering the houses integrated into the pandal.

Fig.1C – Nabin Palli, Hatibagan

The preamble space with looms on display (associated symbols to communicate the theme).

Fig. 1D – Nabin Palli, Hatibagan

The protima has been conceived in a manner which matches the theme.

Fig. 1E – Nabin Palli, Hatibagan

Life cycle of this community.

Fig. 1F – Nabin Palli, Hatibagan

Leaving the pandal behind, yet carrying the image of the space.

Durga Puja is a concept that connects and expands on collective human values and expressions shared by the culture of the city of Kolkata. This concept has a culturally loaded narrative that outlines the mythology of *Devi Durga* and her entourage. This is key to trigger public engagement, responses, and actions in the form of rites and rituals. These sacred practices are manifested through a specific spatial arrangement with appropriate art, architecture and designed ambience that has encoded meaning. The mythology of Devi Durga, her entourage and their symbolism has been detailed by several authors and needs multi-disciplinary scholarship. As a designer, this paper concentrates on the more tangible issues like space that can support the rituals and practices of Durga Puja and create a unique experience of a sacred place. What makes this exercise relevant is an inquiry on how acts of temporary placemaking is able to transform otherwise quotidian city spaces to something that is able to host an extraordinary cultural celebration of the city. The process is also collaborative and co-produced, involving a range of stakeholders and responding to a shared narrative.

To achieve this public spectacle, one requires a design brief, to structure tangible manifestations that is appropriate for meeting the various intangible elements such as ritualistic requirements and associated practices for a holistic experiencing. This is a complex, interrelated, interdependent and negotiated process. This process can be best understood in terms of its various components and the design ideas driving these components. The principal components of Durga Puja are the *Durga Protima* around which the sacred acts are being performed which is the soul of the event, the *Pandal*, the temporary abode for the Divine awakened in the *Protima* (the Clay Image) through various rituals and a stage where this act is being performed live for five days as per the sacred calendar and allowed spectators to be a part of the live demonstration of this sacred act. The design issues, therefore, revolve around these components of the Devi Durga Protima and the Puja Pandal and their realisations for a unique temporal experience. (Fig.2)

Fig. 2 - The Devi Durga Protima in its traditional form

Devi Durga Protima

Devi Durga is an abstract concept - a myth. Translating it in a form that is tangible and well received by the participants and visitors alike is a design issue. Image construction of Devi Durga and her entourage is a cultural tradition and has evolved with time incorporating the social norms along with the accepted forms described in sacred scriptures. Clay is the chosen material as it is a basic element, can be procured through mother earth and can be melted away to its original state, representing the temporality and cyclic nature of life. (Fig.3)

Fig. 3 – Transformation of the clay image (L) into Devi Durga (R) through Chokkudan (a ritualistic process of drawing the eyes of the idol thus bringing alive the clay idol)

Clay idol makers – *Protima Shilpi,* who have been practicing this artform for centuries have acquired the skill and traditional wisdom to translate this idea embedded in myth into a tangible clay image – *Protima*, a visual manifestation. Its composition, form and treatment has been perfected, each *Shilpi*, having the ability to evolve an artistic variation that responds to the imagination and resources of the organising community

and time. To depict the inherent power and importance of a presiding deity, an assortment of ornaments, weapons, accessories are incorporated in accordance with mythology as embellishments. In Indian mythology animals and trees are part of the concept that links us to nature. They emphasise the Deb-Devi's power by specific inclusion as their consorts. *Durga – Singhabahini* rides a lion, destroying the *Mahisasura* (Buffalo demon). *Saraswati* rides a Swan, *Lakshmi* sits over a *Kamal* (Lotus), *Siddhidata Ganesh* has a *mushik* (mouse) as his consort, while *Kartikeya* rides a *Mayur* (Peacock). This process of Protima making represents the idea of *Mahishasura Mardini*.

Mahishasura Mardini (slayer of Mahishsura) (Fig.4)

Fig. 4 – Mahishasura Mardini
(the demon slayer)

Mahishasura the buffalo-demon, king of netherworld prayed long and hard to *Brahma* – Father of creation, for immortality. *Brahma* refused *Mahishasura* of immortality but granted him that he can only die at the hands of a **woman** (*Nari Shakti*). *Mahishasura* empowered with such a blessing, defeated the Gods and drove them out from heaven. The Gods sought protection from Lord Shiva and narrated their woe. A divine effulgence emanated from Shiva's angered face, converging with similar sparks from other gods producing an divine energy that transformed to a towering, ten-armed Shakti (female) form - *Dashabhuja* or the divine conception. The Gods then created replicas of their own weapons to arm her with the *Trishul* (trident), *Chakra* (disc), *Dhanu -Teer* (bow and quiver), *Gada* (mace), *Dhaal* (shield), *Nagpash* (serpent net), *Vajr*a (thunder) and *Kuthar* (axe). Adorned with such power and energy *Devi Durga* invited *Mahishsura* in a duel to defend himself. A fierce war broke out. Mahishasura summoned all his tricks of magic (*Maya*), transfiguring himself into various animal forms, yet he could not get away from her stronghold. Devi Durga finally defeated the demon king and pierced *Mahishasura*'s chest with her trident.

That is the moment frozen in the images of *Mahishasura Mardini* (Slayer of Mahishsura) adorned and worshipped in *puja pandal* throughout Kolkata every autumn. The Mahishasura Mardini image in Bengal is an entourage of other key deities. Devi Durga represents the Mother Earth, *Shakti'*, the power of women, protector of mankind and signifies the concepts of life and society. Durga is accompanied by *Devi Saraswati* (Goddess of knowledge and wisdom), *Devi Lakshmi* (Goddess of prosperity), *Siddhidata Ganesh* (God of wealth and karma), Kartikeya (Protector), and the *Kalabou.*

The myths associated with the deities must be represented in a form that is easy to comprehend by mortals. Artists and sculptors have over the period evolved a culturally accepted conceptualisation of the associated narrative and manifested them through specific clay images. This artistic tradition has been followed over the years. However, artists and sculptors take liberty in their composition, expression, treatment, theme, and temperament making each puja pandal a unique experience. (Fig.5)

Fig. 5 – From (L to R) Ganesh, Lakshmi, Durga, Saraswati and Kartik can be seen

Saraswati (Goddess of learning and wisdom) - Learning and wisdom has been conceived in the female form as Devi Saraswati. She is pure as *Ganga* (lifeline of India). *Saraswati is the embodiment of knowledge. She is the world that informs and inspires. She wears no jewels or cosmetics and drapes herself in a plain white sari with no desire to allure. She must be sought out. She rides a heron, the symbol of concentration, or a gander, the symbol of intellectual discrimination because it is believed to possess the ability to separate water and milk from a mixture. She holds in her four hands a lute, a book, a pen, and a string of memory beads. Difficult to acquire yet eternally faithful, she is the container for all answers.*

Lakshmi (Goddess of Prosperity) *Bejewelled and dressed in red, seated on a lotus, holding a pot overflowing with grain and gold, Lakshmi is the goddess embodying pleasure, prosperity and power that culture harvests out of nature. She is enchanting and whimsical. Holding on to her is a constant struggle. White elephants, rare and precious, salute her with offerings of water. Beside her, sits her twin sister, Alakshmi, goddess of poverty, strife, and misfortune, as an owl symbolising her attitude that demands acknowledgement.*

The warlord) *Kartikeya, is truly a hypermasculine being capable of going to war. He helps the Devas draw out rasa from beneath the earth's surface. Through Kartikeya, Shiva participates in worldly affairs. In art, Kartikeya is represented by symbols of masculinity such as the lance, the rooster and the peacock. He is associated with the planet Mars. He is the helpful god, who stands atop mountains and protects mankind. He has two consorts: Sena, the daughter of Devas, and Valli, the daughter of local tribes. His wives are a symbol of his army and weapons to which he is married.*

Ganesha the Siddhidata (The giver of Success) *Ganesha has an elephant's head, a corpulent body and a serpent tied round his stomach. Elephant, pot belly and serpent are material symbols. That the upper part of his body is created by Shiva and the lower part by Shakti makes him a liminal deity who brings together God and goddess, soul and substance, spiritual bliss and material delights. Ganesha is the lord of thresholds, sitting between yoga and bhoga, discipline and indulgence, monastic orders and fertility rites, Vedic speculation and Tantric rituals. In some scriptures, Riddhi and Siddhi, wealth and wisdom, are his wives. Subha and Labha, auspicious and profit are his sons. Santoshi, satisfaction is his daughter. His rat represents the unmanageable, stubborn problems of life that he keeps at bay. Gonesha is thus the god of the present, sitting between the past and the future, removing all obstacles, ensuring the realisation of every dream.*

The other cultural narrative popular in Bengal, associates Durga with **Parvati or Uma**, beloved mother, and daughter. Parvati, after all, is the daughter of the Himalayas who gained Shiva's love after long penance and married him against her mother's wishes. It is this daughter who returns to the lap of the Himalayas every year with her children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya and Ganesh from her divine abode on Mt Kailash. Here, Parvati places *Durga* in a familial context and provides a vital clue to why a martial goddess is worshipped as a Mother, daughter, and wife. *Kavi Bharatchandra* in his *Annadamangal kabya* included this familial concept of *'Durga'* to invoke the parent's love for their daughter. As per the then social construct of Bengal, where married daughters seldom got a chance to visit their maternal home, Durga Puja became a relevant context in terms of popular myth to be included in the practice. Even today, Durga Puja is a period for homecoming of sons and daughters, traversing national and international borders, to reunite with family and relatives. Social scientists often interpret the ensemble of *Durga* i.e., *Saraswati-Kartikeya-Lakshmi-Ganesha* as the four *barnashram* (occupations) prescribed in *Vedas, Brahmin-Kshatriya-Vishya-Sudra*.

The third narrative symbolizes Durga as **Shakambari / Nabapatrika** – Goddess of Vegetation. In the early hours of *Saptami*, Goddess Durga is invoked in a group of nine plants bunched together, called *Nabapatrika,* which are tied to the twigs of an *aparajita* plant with yellow thread. These nine plants represent the nine manifestations of the Goddess. *Nabapatrika is* adorned in a red bordered white saree and vermillion is smeared on its leaves. Later she is placed on the right side of *Ganesha.* This is the reason she is popularly known as *Ganesha's wife,* fondly called *Kala-bou* (banana bride). *Nabapatrika* is worshipped alongside the *Durga* and all other deities. *Nabapatrika* is a conscious effort to include the Goddess of Harvest (*Shakambhari*), a notion taken from folk traditions, where Mother Earth (*Prithibi-Prakriti)* is being worshipped as goddess of harvest. Thus, in the Nabapatrika ritual, local folk traditions have been incorporated with the Puranik traditions of Durga to respect local ecological context. (Fig.6)

Fig. 6 – (L) the ritualistic organisation of nine seasonal plants and (R) the bathing of kala-bou (sanctifying the ensemble with the sacred spirit)

The Puja Pandal

The overall composition of *Durga Protima* is essentially a central symmetric composition. The towering Durga riding over her escort lion defeating the *Mahishasura* (the buffalo demon) is the central figure, flanked on by Devi Lakshm' and Dev Kartik on the left and Devi Saraswati and Ganesha on the right. The most traditional composition is the *Ek-Chala*, where all the five deities are clustered within a single frame. This format has been used in *Barir Pujo*. However, this central composition of ek-chala may vary in size. Smaller ones prefer a compact vertical arrangement whereas the more elaborate ones are composed horizontally. *Baroari and Sarbojonin Puja* also prefer further separation and use the horizontal composition as a central ensemble. This is required when there is minimum foreground space. The composition of the arrangement of the idols is dependent on the spatial configuration of the Pandal, their theme and the anticipated visitor movement. (Fig.7A,7B)

Fig. 7A – Compostional variations retaining the centrality of the original composition

Fig. 7B – Artistic variations exploring folk themes while also retaining the original mood

The design typology of Puja pandal has evolved over the time. In early Zamindars houses they were accommodated in the *Thakur Dalan* – a spatial arrangement that worked as an interface between the private and public realm. It is a necessity that retains the privacy of the residential space, the *Andarmahal* while inviting the outsider free access to participate in the social event located in the *Bahir mahal*. The Thakur Dalan is a covered space, well connected with the residence so that the priests, helped by the women of the house, can carry out necessary arrangements for the puja rituals. Since the Thakur Dalan is meant for

carrying out a public event-, it must have a common space for public gathering. This can take different forms like an open courtyard or a covered hall. A courtyard in front of the Thakur Dalan is the most commonly used architectural solution, as they allow light and ventilation within the confines of residential space, apart from it being usable for multiple purposes. It provides flexibility in the architecture that helps respond to various social and cultural events. This typology has been also adapted by the affluent, traditional trading families who are essentially joint families with different generations living together. Traditionally in the Thakur Dalan, Protimas have been created by *protima shilpis* for generation. In the process, the Thakur Dalan has assumed an imagined sacred space during Durga Puja. (Fig.8)
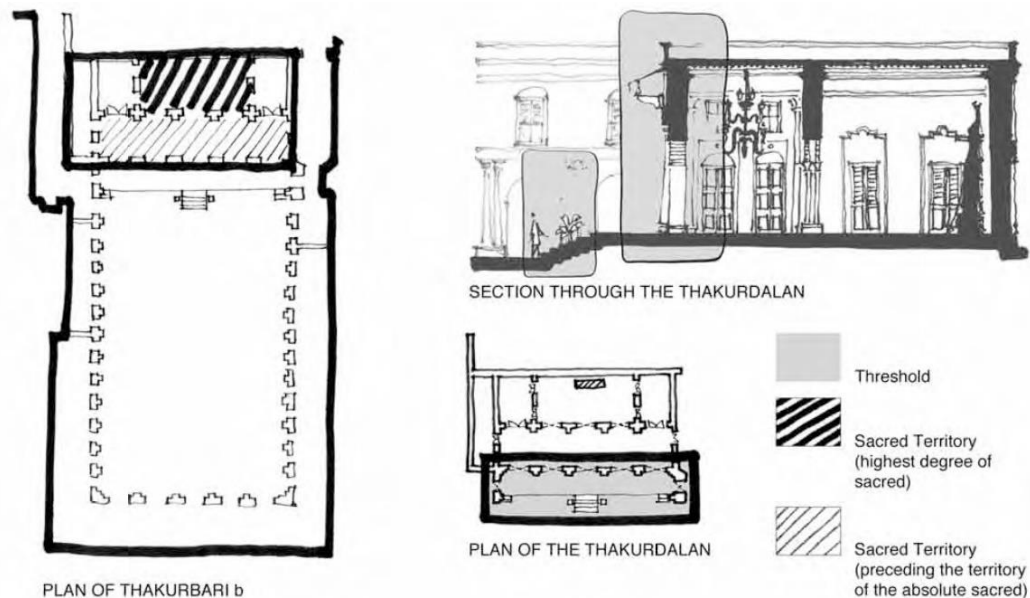

Fig. 8 – (Top) Plan and spatial structure of the Thakur Dalan showing (Below) how the Dalan of the traditional house becomes the core of all public activities during the Pujo

When the *bonedi puja* became *baroari*, they needed to continue with the thakur dalan typology which became the basic prototype for a Puja Pandal. Pandals are a temporary construction with two essential components – a *thakur dalan* for accommodating the *thakur protima* (deity image) and a foreground for

public gathering- popularly known as *puja mandap*. It is temporary because it occupies the public realm, and exists only to celebrate a temporary but cyclic, public event. When the *baroari* puja evolved into *sarbojonin*, they retained and further elaborated this pandal typology. It also allowed the organisers flexibility for artistic and architectural interpretation to meet, respond and appropriate different sites according to their configuration, size and site constraints. This design flexibility has liberated the creativity and innovativeness of the communities that transforms a local public event into a large-scale cultural celebration of the city of Kolkata.

The Puja is the most important event of a local community and an elaborate public affair. Each locality constitutes a puja committee for organising the event. Usually local clubs and organizations take on this responsibility. In some cases, a puja committee is specially instituted. They are responsible for fund raising, identifying the site for the event, resolving issues according to the rules and regulations of the local administration, designing the puja pandal and Protima, and administering the implementation while maintaining a time schedule. They are also responsible for organising the puja rituals according to specified *nirghanto*, carrying out crowd management round the clock, dismantling the puja pandal and its installations and restoring it back to its original state after completion of the festival. (Fig.9)
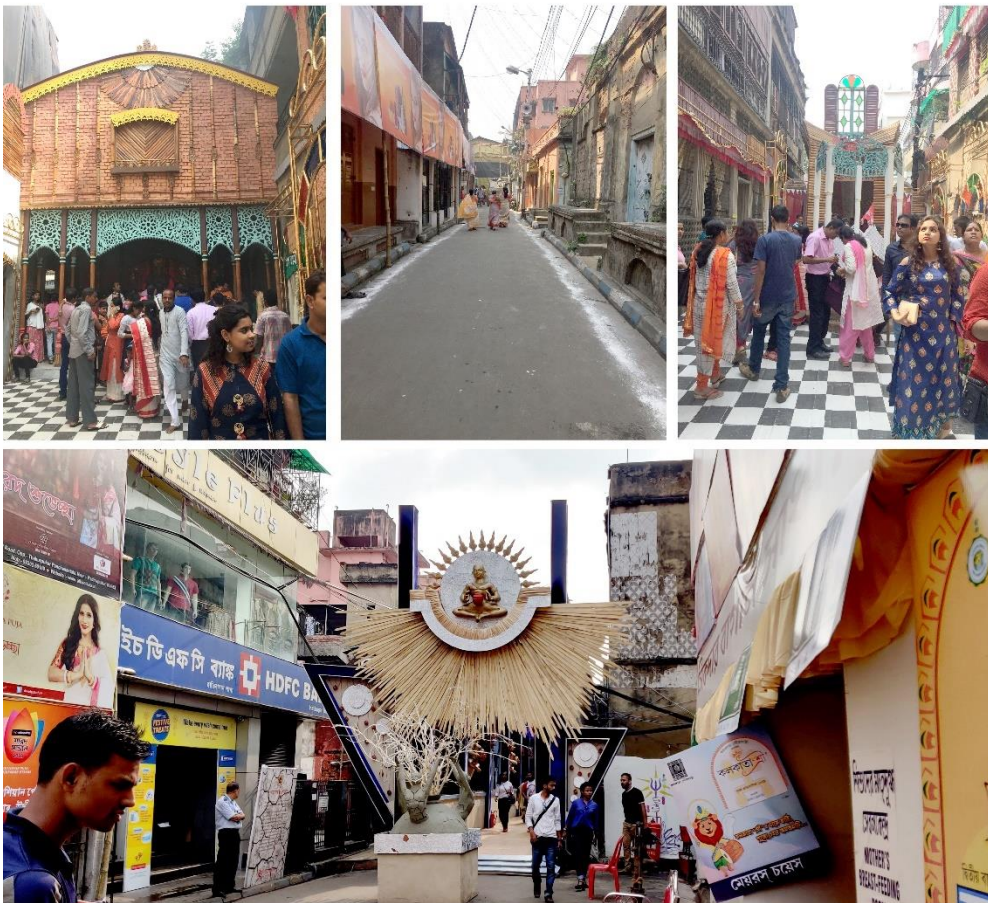

Fig.9 – Temporal transformation of the Sikdar bagan Pujo street over the years

Identification of the site for the event is central to the process. In a traditional urban fabric it is mostly predetermined. The site can be a wide footpath, a front setback, parking spaces, street corners, junctions or even the street or a bazar itself. More fortunate localities can avail a vacant lot. More elaborate *sarbojonin pujas* are organised in formal open spaces - parks, squares, mela grounds etc. The temporary urban transformations are more pronounced in restricted and constrained sites which are forced to be more innovative and creative in nature and can become a key attraction. (Fig.10A,10B,10C,10D,10E,10F)

Fig.10A – Hari Ghosh Street

A typical example of a small community Pujo encroaching part of the street parking.

Fig.10B – Chaltabagan

A typical example of a community Pujo on the side of a main street.

Fig. 10C – Pallisree, Ultadanga

A para Pujo occupying the local lane/street.

Fig.10D – Tridhara Sanmilani

An iconic Pujo occupying an important street junction (3 way) of the city.

Fig. 10E – Natun Dal, Behala

A neighbourhood Pujo occupying an abandoned building in the area.

Fig. 10F – a Pujo at Salt Lake Kolkata

A block level pujo occupying the community park.

Due to the large-scale nature of this temporal act, substantial inconvenience in the locality due to congestion, lack of privacy, and safety and security issues may be faced. It begins during the process of its implementation for movement of materials, storage and labour hutments. During the festival days there is an onslaught of visitors from every part of the city and beyond, for consecutive days and nights during the Durga Puja event. Yet the local community accepts this transformation to celebrate the event of the year. This transformation affects the public realm and involves large number of people which requires clearance from the local administration to ensure adherence to the prescribed guidelines. (Fig.11A,11B)
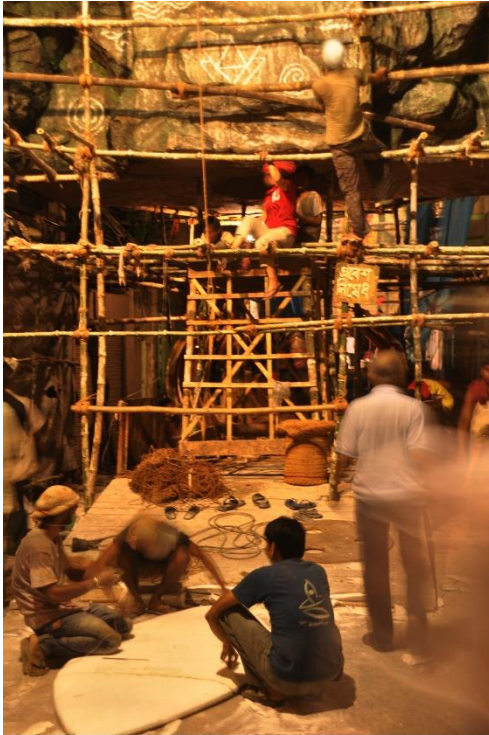

Fig. 11A – Photos of Nalini Sarkar Street showing the process of transforming the local street into a Durga Pujo Pandal

Fig. 11B – The

Durga Puja pandal of Nalini Sarkar street

Conclusion

Breaking the numerous constraints, the temporary urban transformation that takes place in the locality emerges as a unique public space – a simulation of popular sacred imagery, rites and rituals, folk traditions, cultural events, public monuments and even an imagined space. The *unreal* co-exists with the *real* to create a unique temporal experience aligning with Foucault's concept of Heterotopia. The resultant space also depends on the resourcefulness of the organisers to provide a platform for manifesting the *publicness* and creativity of the design fraternity. (Fig.12)

Fig. 12 – Temporal imageries aiding the manifestation of the heterotopic space of the event

The creation of the urban space, the process involved over the years has been documented by the author in *Kolkata – o Durga Puja*. The creative explorations of the Puja Pandal has been extensively discussed by Tapati Guha Thakurta in her book *Image of the Goddess* and catalogued by Samrat Chattopadhyay in his *Kolkata Pujo Notebook* and as an optical manifestation of social infrastructure, a concept elaborated by Swati Chattopadhyay.

In this paper, the author has tried to deliberate on the design process involved in constructing a temporal space along with its tangible and intangible interpretations and engagements. Temporal space is about experiencing, visualising, and realising the unreal – a celebration of life in its various forms. This temporal quality gives a city its uniqueness. (Fig.13)

Fig. 13 – Nepal Bhattacharya Lane – Kalighat, an awarded Puja Pandal

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