



# Radical housing and socially-engaged art – Reflections from a tenement town in Delhi's extensive urbanisation

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## **Abstract**

The relegation of workers housing to grey spaces or planned illegalities has ensured the availability of a permanently temporary migrant workforce to fuel the extensive urbanisation shaping around cities like Delhi. These grey spaces emerge as tenement towns in place of former agrarian villages, run and developed by agricultural landowners turned tenement entrepreneurs that exploit labour migrants as permanently temporary tenants. The challenges posed by the invisibilisation of such relations manifested sharply under the COVID-19 pandemic. A radical feminist politics has been emerging at the interstices as a counter against such violent dispossession employing creative narratives and ways of protest. This paper discusses the need for approaches that transcend research-activism boundaries while engaging with particularly marginalised communities. It discusses the potentials presented by socially engaged art in empowering radical politics through reflections from a long-term art-based inquiry conducted with women migrants in Kapashera, a tenement town located around Delhi.

## **Keywords**

Socially engaged art, Radical housing, Creative methodologies, Tenement housing, Delhi

## **Introduction**

The hinterland of Delhi served as a laboratory for the post-nineties urbanisation for profit in India (YACHIKO ENGINEERING Co., LTD: & Techno Consultants, Inc., 1993, p. 6.10-6.15). This project, which has been simultaneously unfolding across the planet as

what Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid describe as extended urbanisation (2015), was predicated on a 'new economic logic'. In the hinterland of Delhi, this materialised as a spatial planning regime that mandated externalisation of unprofitable infrastructures while ensuring an abundant supply of cheap land and labour.

Under this regime, labour housing was treated both as an unprofitable infrastructure and as a means to ensure abundant cheap labour (YACHIKO ENGINEERING Co., LTD: & Techno Consultants, Inc., 1993, pp. 7–11). As evidenced in recent literature on *tenementisation* in the region (eg., Naik, 2015; Cowan, 2018b; Gururani, 2019), this led the agrarian settlements whose land was appropriated for urbanisation to capitalise on the affordable housing gap. This led to a proliferation of working class rental settlements as 'planned illegalities' (Bhan, 2013) in the extensive urbanisation (Simone, 2019) shaping around Delhi. Following Marie Huchzermeyer (2011), this typology of rental districts is categorised relationally as 'tenement towns' (Bathla, 2019, 2020a) and will be referred to as such in the remainder of the paper.

Importantly, however, this pushing of labour housing into the margins, that Oren Yiftachel (2009) calls 'gray spaces', has served a dual purpose. It has not only allowed the selective development of profitable housing, but it has also helped maintain a 'permanently temporary' workforce (Yiftachel, 2009) of casual and contractual workers. Clandestine partnerships between transnational actors, local governance institutions, and private proprietors have enabled a covert governmentality in the tenement towns. Allowing for resistance against the marginalisation of work and housing and possibilities of collectivisation by the workers to be suppressed.

These alliances came to the fore during the 2011–2012 Maruti Suzuki riots when the semi-feudal tenement proprietors helped factories quell the extensive protests against casualisation of work (Teltumbde, 2012). Such partnerships allow managerial models such as the 'low cost flexibility model' (Sundar, 2012) to extend beyond the shop floor and into urban space. The violence, patriarchy, and ethnic othering exert an attempt at quelling emancipatory spaces for working class mobilization that emerge through a vibrant cohabitation of workers (Engels, 1935). Against these counter-revolutionary currents however, a politics of emplacement seems to be emerging among the women labour migrants inhabiting the tenement towns. Tom Cowan (2018a) terms this as 'subaltern counter-urbanism' to emphasise how the women resist everyday practices of alienation and oppression.

Building on Michele Lancione's (2020) call to broaden 'radical politics', we attempt to understand these feminist struggles as resistance against housing precarity that emerges between the cracks. However, as Lancione points out, an important question that emerges while researching with particularly vulnerable communities is over the value of knowledge production. In particular, we became interested in how to empower the emergent radical politics through turning critical theory into critical action. Drawing inspiration from Lancione's (2017) call to explore creative methodologies to cut across academic and grassroots spaces, we began experimenting with socially engaged art in our engagement with the community.

As Claire Bishop (2006) notes, socially engaged art has emerged as a prominent stream in ‘art practice’ at the ‘social turn’ in art which she locates around the 1990s. A number of radical art experiments such as ‘Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust’ in Liverpool (Thompson, 2017) have been employing art practice for the appropriation of social space. These dialectical counter-movements allow for people and place to reconnect against the onslaught of abstract space (ibid.). A diverse range of practices such as ‘Refugee Heritage’ by DAAR in Palestine (Petti, Hilal, Weizman, & Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency, 2013), and ‘the room project’ (*oda projesi*), by a women’s collective in Istanbul have been employing such radical possibilities.

As Caroline Turner and Geeta Kapur (2017) note, artists in India have increasingly employed social change as it references a civil society in ferment. Thus, socially engaged art has been gathering momentum owing to the desire for effective urban change. This led to the emergence of embedded community practices through establishing safe spaces for transformative change in neighbourhoods such as Khirki village in Delhi (Dave, 2018). Building upon the experience of such practices and benefitting from an art grant, we were able to initiate a long-term art inquiry in the tenement town of Kapashera in 2019. This project was imbedded in the curatorial initiative of KHOJ International Artists Association on art practices investigating the issues of urban peripheralisation and gender.<sup>1</sup>

Adopting the liminal potentials presented in the ontological pluralism of Amaya Querejazu’s (2016) work, we decided to name the project Studio Otherworlds.<sup>2</sup> The project emerged in collaboration between Sumedha Garg, an artist and educator, and Nitin Bathla, an urban researcher and activist, and women migrants in Kapashera. While Sumedha drew upon experiences with community art engagement in South Africa and India, Nitin drew upon fieldwork on Delhi’s extensive urbanisation through the lenses of critical urban theory and community practice.<sup>3</sup> Kapashera is a ‘tenement town’ of over 300,000 labour migrants, located in the green belt between the cities of Delhi and Gurgaon in the extensive urbanisation around Delhi (Bathla, 2020a). A majority of the labour migrants living here work in garment manufacturing for European and US American fast fashion brands located in the nearby Udyog Vihar. As we will elaborate later in the paper, the community became an integral part of this collaboration.

Through this collaboration, our aim was to operationalise crossovers between art, critical urban theory, and activism through exploring multiple ontologies of the urban in Kapashera. Furthermore, the project aimed at working on the interstices between the questions of class, labour, ethnic and gender-based violence, and housing in the incipient urbanisation of Delhi. In this paper, we discuss reflections from our socially engaged art inquiry in Kapashera and its potentials for empowering everyday practices of resistance at

<sup>1</sup> More information regarding the Socially-engaged art curatorial initiative of KHOJ can be found at - <https://kjojworkshop.org/opportunity/one-year-long-multi-local-socially-engaged-art-projects-across-peri-urban-areas-in-india/>

<sup>2</sup> Further information on the project, community and the artists can be found at [www.studiootherworlds.com](http://www.studiootherworlds.com)

<sup>3</sup> This project is a part of the doctoral research of Nitin Bathla at the Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich. The project entitled ‘Delhi without Borders’ is funded through the federal Swiss Excellence Scholarship.

the margins. We discuss how and if art can serve to liberate the production of urban space, particularly housing, from its patriarchal, masculine, violent ethos. In the following sections, we discuss the radical possibilities and constraints for crossover between art practice and urban change presented through socially engaged art.

## **Socially engaged Art**

Before we introduce the project, it is important to establish what we mean by socially engaged art and how we interpret it as a research methodology. As Claire Bishop (2006, p. 1) points out, socially engaged art has emerged in the expanded field of relational practices in what she terms as the ‘social turn’ in art. These practices are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity whether with pre-existing communities or through establishing one’s own community (Bishop, 2006, p. 1). In a more recent book, Bishop argues (2012, p. 3) that the ‘social turn’ in art which she locates in the 1990s is in fact merely a return to the social. She correlates the emergence of art movements such as the historic avant-garde circa 1917, and the so-called ‘neo’ avant-garde leading to 1968 with moments of political upheaval and social change. She argues that each of these phases have been accompanied by a utopian rethinking of art’s relationship to the social and its political potential.

This most recent ‘social turn’ in art in the Indian context has been concomitant with an increasing number of artists trying to make sense of social change amidst rapid post-1990s urbanisation. As Rajesh Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sanyal (2011) highlight, the current wave of globalised urbanisation in India has produced a segregated urban fabric with gated new towns set against large dispossessed populations. Concomitantly, a number of community art organisations have also emerged offering an infrastructure of experimental and safe spaces to artists responding to emerging urban realities in India.

While we do not attempt an exhaustive survey of community art organisations, a few of them include KHOJ International Artists Association (Delhi, 1997), Sarai (Delhi, 2000), Experimenter (Kolkata, 2007), and CONA (Mumbai, 2012). Building upon this, an emerging wave of artists have been exploring the questions of urban land and ecology (eg., White-Mazzarella, Mehta, & Grewal, 2015), media urbanism (eg. Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2008), mapping and architecture (eg. Studios, Chatterjee, & Gupte, 2010).

Drawing upon this momentum of emerging relational art practices and their own work, KHOJ International Artists Association launched a nationwide open call for socially engaged art projects in 2019 (Sehgal, 2019). Proposals for art-based interventions and creative strategies for social change through engagement with marginalised groups in peri-urban areas and urban villages in India were invited through the call.<sup>4</sup> The aim was to foster long-term community based art inquiries undertaken with civil society organisations around the issues

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<sup>4</sup> Detailed information regarding the curatorial call, funding, criteria and shortlisted projects can be found at - <https://kjojworkshop.org/opportunity/one-year-long-multi-local-socially-engaged-art-projects-across-peri-urban-areas-in-india/>

of urban peripheralisation and gender.<sup>5</sup> After a two-tier review process, our proposal was selected among four recipients across India that received an initial grant for one year under the curatorial initiative of KHOJ.

While at first our understanding of the term socially engaged art was inherited from the curatorial initiative of KHOJ, we found the following definition by Pablo Helguera (2011) to be relevant to our experience with it. Helguera describes socially engaged art as a temporary snatching away of subjects and problems from other disciplines into the ambiguous realm of art. He claims that this act of shifting helps bring unique insights to a particular condition by rendering them visible to other disciplines. We were inspired to investigate how the questions of housing and labour marginalisation—under what has been described as extended urbanisation (Brenner & Schmid, 2015)—can find crossovers.

Although these subjects have attracted meaningful debates in the field of urban studies (eg., Kanai, 2014; Lees, Shin & López-Morales, 2016) their focus remains solely on the exchange value of housing. As Lancione (2020) rightfully points out, this has been limiting for housing activists worldwide, who frame the ‘housing struggle’ in terms of ‘use value’ or as a struggle to affirm a different way of being in the world. Following Lancione (2017), we were inspired to explore socially engaged art as a creative methodology to pursue active and emancipatory engagement with vulnerable groups. Through this, we were interested in exploring possibilities of what Lancione calls ‘the active role of research’, and the blurring of research-activist boundaries.

Moreover, this crossover across the research-activism boundary also allowed us an opportunity to extend and bring into conversation our own respective research-activist methods and ways of seeing. Namely, Nitin’s inquiry into the questions of labour housing, infrastructure, and ecology in the extensive urbanisation (Simone, 2019) of Delhi, and the art, gender, and education based community engagement pursued by Sumedha. Contrary to Claire Bishop’s (2012, p. 276) claim, that social and artistic discourses in socially engaged art remain in a constant contradiction, we experienced them as being complementary.

Importantly, our aim for this crossover was to transcend beyond merely identifying structural processes affecting the community, towards empowering how they contest and shape its incipient urbanity. Thus, rather than being aesthetics driven, our art intervention in the community was space based. As we will highlight later in this paper, we decided to establish a safe space in the community where reflections through collective discussions and production could take place. It was through these activities that an aesthetic for the project emerged inductively. However, as our intervention tackled an intersection of complex problematics, we adopted a multi-sited and mobile approach for working across spaces both within and beyond the community.

While close collaboration between the artists and inhabitant communities is a defining feature of socially engaged art, the questions of who participates and under which conditions are important considerations (Bishop, 2012). Furthermore, who comprises the audience for

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<sup>5</sup> KHOJ runs a community art space in Khirki village located in South Delhi. Through the art space, the organisation has been actively engaging with issues of urban inequality, marginalisation and participation.

socially engaged art is equally important. The participation of the community can be nominal, directed, creative, and collaborative (Helguera, 2011, p. 14). Under nominal participation, community members passively engage with the work, whereas in directed participation, they complete a simple task to contribute towards the creation of the work. In creative participation, however, community members provide content for work within a structure established by an artist. While in collaborative participation, community members share responsibility for developing the structure and content of the work in direct dialogue with the artist.

While our approach was largely collaborative participation driven, we often oscillated not only in terms of how participation is directed but also in the boundary between the artist and the community. As we will detail later, we decided to not only flatten the hierarchy of participation, but also to use the art grant from KHOJ to develop community resources. Instead of an event based transient participation with the community, our approach was a long-term one, or in words of Donna Haraway (2016), one of ‘staying with the trouble’.

While our familiarity with Kapashera – with Nitin researching here since 2017 and Sumedha living nearby – allowed us accessibility, we decided to forge alliances with existing civil society operations in the community. Our primary partnership was with a women workers’ union operating out of Kapashera, *Sakhi Kala Manch* (Friend’s art collective). The union empowers women migrants’ fight for wage parity and against casualisation of work, alongside a struggle against domestic violence, and rent based evictions. The union utilises creative methods such as singing and performance for protests. We identified important intersections with the work of *Sakhi Kala Manch* and saw potential in working with and further strengthening their political work through encounters and conversations.

Rather than inventing a new forum within the community, our intention was to strengthen existing political forums within the community. This forum, as we will highlight below, manifested as a collective of women migrant workers in the safe space initiated through this project. This collective in turn became the instigators of a tapestry that lay at the heart of our art-based inquiry in Kapashera. This tapestry served as a material medium for generating encounters, conversations, and crossovers both within and beyond the community. Our intention was thus to employ art to empower the agency of the community for political resistance against forces of patriarchy, dominance, and othering within and beyond the community.

### **Kapashera in the global countryside of the empire of cotton**

*“The violence of market making – forcing people to work in certain locations in certain ways – has been a constant throughout the history of the empire of cotton. Cotton growers are still forced to grow the crop; workers are still held as virtual prisoners in factories. Moreover, the fruits of their activities continue to be distributed in radically unequal ways - with cotton growers in Benin, for example, making a dollar a day or less, while the owners of cotton growing businesses in the United States have collectively received government subsidies of more than \$35 billion between 1995 and 2010. Workers in Bangladesh stitch together clothing under absurdly dangerous conditions for very low wages, while consumers in the United*

*States and Europe can purchase those pieces with abandon, at prices that often seem impossibly low.”* (Beckert, 2014, p. 381)

In the book ‘Empire of Cotton’, Sven Beckert (2014) follows the global history of capitalism through the humble yet ubiquitous cotton cloth. He explains how industrial capitalism was built on a radical recasting of local cotton industries the world over. This was done through a violent insertion of a ‘global production complex’ through colonial expropriation and slavery (Beckert, 2014, p. 140). This ‘empire of cotton’, linking territory, labour, markets, and capital, continues to drive metropolitan accumulation even today through labour exploitations in the ‘global countryside’ (Beckert, 2014, p. 155).

Kapashera, the location of our intervention, is one such intimately imbedded site in the global production complex of the empire of cotton. As Tom Cowan’s research highlights (see also: Bathla, 2019, 2020a; 2018b, 2019) hundreds of thousands of garment factory workers inhabit Kapashera in closely built tenement blocks. The latest public health census (2019) estimates approximately 300,000 labour migrants in an area of less than two square kilometres. Most of these workers are employed as casual and contractual labour and make long-distance migration from Eastern Indian states driven by forces of uneven development (Smith, 2010). Violence and coercion are exerted on the migrant workers in the form of both housing and labour by a class that Tom Cowan terms as the ‘village rentiers’. These are former agricultural landowners that have switched to tenement construction to enterprise on the affordable housing gap.

While labour migration and tenementisation has shaped Kapashera, it is not an exception, but similar settlement transformation has accompanied the extensive urbanisation of a ‘Delhi without borders’.<sup>6</sup> The rapid extension of urban fabric that has accompanied the post-1990s economic liberalisation has generated profitability through the externalisation of ‘unprofitable infrastructures’ such as workers housing.<sup>7</sup> This has resulted in tenement housing emerging in the villages whose agrarian land was valorised for urbanisation. A critical task is to understand the production of such settlements in relation to manufacturing centralities, condominiums, and strip malls.

However, as Oren Yiftachel (2009) reminds us, the production of such ‘gray spaces’ serves a dual purpose of maintaining migrant workers as a ‘permanently temporary’ surplus workforce. Thus, while millions of workers live in settlements like Kapashera for over a decade, they have no possibility to exert tenancy or housing rights. The enterprise of rental housing does not end at rental collection from the labour migrants but extends into a violence that is required to maintaining their ‘permanent temporariness’. This violence is extended through overt forms such as evictions, non-issuance of rental contracts, etc. and covert forms such as ethnic othering, gendering, and surveillance. Kapashera thus serves as an important site to not only structurally understand the reasons behind the proliferation of such gray spaces, but also the social struggles in remaking them.

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<sup>6</sup> Title of forthcoming doctoral research of Nitin Bathla (a co-author of this paper) at ETH Zurich.

<sup>7</sup> This is from the forthcoming dissertation of Nitin Bathla and a forthcoming paper in the housing studies journal and for the reasons of length cannot be expanded here further.

Under the regime of rental maximisation exerted through the ‘village rentiers’, Kapashera lacks any open spaces or community infrastructure. With the exception of a few NGOs operating from tiny spaces, there are no spaces for recreation or safe spaces for women and children in the community. We thus felt a crucial need to establish a safe space as a community asset through the art grant. We felt that such a space could empower existing ‘radical politics’ within the community through allowing migrants, especially women and children, a space sheltered from violence, patriarchal norms, and practice of othering. We thought it might help empower subtle transgressions against dominant roles and hierarchies existing in Kapashera. The motivation of our socially engaged art inquiry in Kapashera was thus not to merely cast a critical view at ‘the empire of cotton’ from the global countryside, but also to identify and empower resistance against local and global hierarchies.

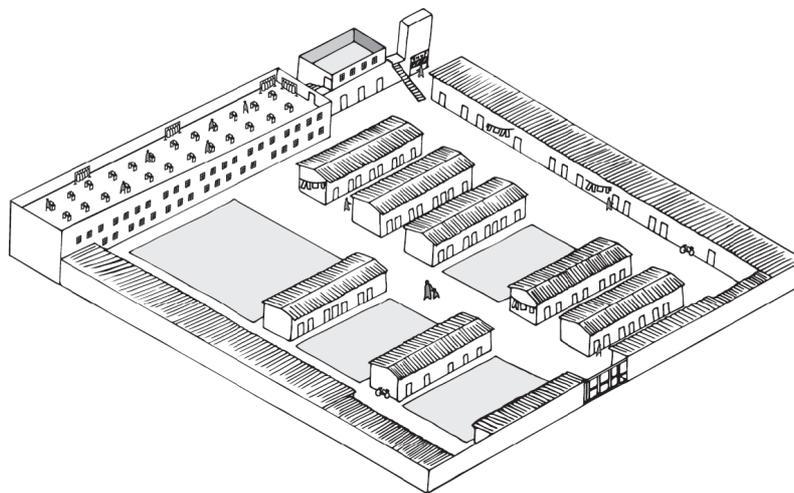
### **Studio Otherworlds**

During the initial months of our engagement in the community, we conducted go-along interviews and walks (Carpiano, 2009) inspired by the *dérive* method from situationist geography (Pinder, 1996). We walked with a diverse range of actors in the community and could identify many latent potentials within the community. During one such walk, we identified some progressive actors among the village rentiers who were inclined towards the idea of introducing activity spaces for the migrants.

We were thus able to access an industrial loft at a subsidised rate, which we decided to open up to the community for a period of one year. The site where the safe space was located functions as a microcosm of Kapashera (figure 1), located adjacent to both a manufacturing unit and to tenement housing for workers. We furnished the space minimally with as found furniture from the site, introduced play spaces for kids, and decided to make it freely accessible to the community. We decided to be in the space at least four days every week and organised a number of activities and workshops for the children and women. Gradually, as the community started to use the space, we made multiple keys to the space available for the community.

### **Figure 1**

A view of Studio Otherworlds in Kapashera with tenements and a production unit located adjacent. **Illustration: Bhavyaa Parashar**



As the familiarity among the community for the space grew, stitching circles and activity groups started to emerge in the space. Women from the community started to bring house-based work they would do in their free time to the space. As Kapashera is an important node in planetary metabolic flows, manufacturing leaves behind a huge volume of waste cuts and rejected pieces. This waste often finds its way into house-based work that women undertake in Kapashera and is transformed into rugs, covers, and tapestries through weaving and stitching.

We decided to employ this waste as a material in our project. We were interested in exploring both the site of the stitching circle and textile waste as a critical medium. The stitching circle started to emerge as an important site for critical discussions where the women would discuss issues like domestic violence, work, and economic problems. Building upon this symbolic site, we started to learn from the women and started to pick up on discussions in the circle exploring potentials for collective action and inquiry. A stitching circle started to slowly take shape among the women, serving as a symbolic space for collective art, conversations and healing.<sup>8</sup>

### **Forming a collective**

In August 2019, through the support of '*Sakhi Kala Manch*', we were able to initiate a collective from among the women who frequented the space. A total of five women joined it initially and the circle eventually grew to include other women from across the community. The idea behind the collective was to formulate a forum through which the art-based inquiry could be initiated from within the community. Furthermore, through the collective we also wanted to channel the art grant and democratise the process through which its allocation happens within the community. We wanted to acknowledge the hidden labour that is put into socially engaged art and therefore share the art grant for producing resources within the community.

The collective received a small monthly stipend through the grant, which it had autonomy over. What this allowed to do is to provide the women in the collective a possibility of making a break from their everyday routines and cast a critical look on the issues of memory, cohabitation, gender, space, and ecology. Every once in a while, we would introduce prompts in the collective, to which they would respond and discuss while stitching. Our intention was to develop a material and audio archive of these ideas and discussions, which as we will elaborate below came together as a collective tapestry. In this circle we initially experimented with directed and creative participation, where we started by introducing concepts and problematics to the group. However, gradually the participation moved more towards a collaborative mode where the women started to guide the themes, concepts, aesthetics, and ideas themselves.

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<sup>8</sup> See also artist Susie Vickery's work with NGO SNEHA in Dharavi, Mumbai. Vickery employs embroidery as a medium for expressing traumas of domestic violence. <http://www.dharaviennale.com/mapping-the-hurt>

An important moment in the project emerged around the naming of the collective. We put this task back to the women, asking them how they would name it. After a week of thinking, they came back to us with a name that transformed the way we approached our participation in the project. They decided to name their collective *saat sabeliyan*, or the seven sisters. This was puzzling for us as the core group of women at this point consisted only of five women. It was soon afterwards that we realised that the women also included Sumedha and Bhavyaa (our former project archivist) in the collective. They saw us as one of them, as insiders. When we inquired regarding the choice of number seven as the collective could increase or decrease in size with time, they responded by saying: ‘we began as seven and this will always remain with us’. In the representation for the collective, of which they stitched a self-portrait (see figure 4) they depict themselves along with Sumedha and Bhavyaa. Without realizing it, our everyday lives had become entangled with the personal stories of the women through the project. The fact that they considered us one of them was an indication that they considered us as equals, as insiders.

### **Figure 2**

A story piece by Vandana about harassment in Kapashera. She draws men they encounter on the way back from work who try to touch them, and the collective strategy that women adopt in order to resist this. **Credits: Bhavyaa Parashar**



### **Figure 3**

Manju draws a khalonie in Kapashera. She chose to intentionally increase the size of the walls in order to highlight the strong sense of enclosure and surveillance that the residents feel inside the khalonie. At the same time, she draws kids playing in the spaces between the houses. **Credits: Bhavyaa Parashar**



**Figure 4**

The self-portraits of the women on top of the patchwork of their stories.  
Credits: Bhavyaa Parashar



During the course of the project, our participation in the project and engagement with the community has oscillated. We started the project as outsiders, a position that we were consciously aware of, which we utilised to gain liminal access between the various stakeholders in the community. However, the socially engaged art project allowed us to eventually become an integral member of the community, become one with it. This helped us flatten the hierarchy in art production through the project.

### Counter-cartography – subverting the cadastral map

The cadastral map serves as an important tool to exert power and domination over land in Kapashera and former agrarian settlements like it. As Tom Cowan (2019) highlights, the agrarian revenue office continues to exist and govern land transactions in these former agrarian villages even after they have been urbanised and are no longer agrarian. The cadastral plan thus starts to serve as a *de facto* masterplan allowing the former farmers/landowners to shape the urbanity of these settlements. The cadastral plan manifests not only as a register that allows the gradual tenementisation of the agrarian cadastres, but also acts as a cartography of power. It allows landowners to exert dominance over the lives of migrants and exclude them from its future possibilities. Thus, the cadastral plan serves as primary object in constructing the space of the settlements as a ‘gray space’ in which migrant bodies remain as ‘permanently temporary’ subjects (Yiftachel, 2009).

The plan is held at the revenue office located at the edge of Kapashera and has an interesting materiality. It is hand-drawn on linen (figure 5) with finely numbered cadastres indicating the ownership structure of the village. Hundreds of land-owning men walk in and out of this office everyday making new additions in the cadastre and validating old transactions. The linen sheet containing the cadastral plan is folded and unfolded, new lines are etched and sub-cadastre numbers added. While the change in land use is seldom acknowledged in this register, it serves as an interstitial register to hold ownership. The

cadastral plan thus exerts abstract space over the settlement.<sup>9</sup> However, it is exclusively authored and remains under the ownership of the male tenement owners. The knowledge and ownership over the cadastral plan seldom pass to the migrants who inhabit these settlements.

Contrary to the projection of power and patriarchy exerted through the cadastral plan, the migrants inhabiting these settlements ascribe association, play, and imagination to the landscape. In between what Tom Cowan (2019) calls the ‘militarised grid of tenements’ in Kapashera, emerge moments of resistance. Migrants cultivate small patches of plants and herbs, organise ephemeral events such as festivals, build spaces through associative memory of the places they arrive from. These translocal moments help reproduce a social space beneath the cartographic abstraction of the cadastral plan.

Building upon Giorgio Agamben’s idea of ‘profanation’ (2007), we aimed to subvert this cartography of power through our art intervention. Agamben (2007, p. 77) explains profanation as a political operation that deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized. We introduced this map in the women’s stitching circle in an attempt to develop a dialogue around it. The women expressed that the map reminded them of a tapestry, a palimpsest of what exists underneath and on the surface. However, they said that they miss their presence, their worlds on it. This prompted us to explore the psychogeographical aspects of Kapashera in discussion with the women.

In the words of D Pinder (1996, p. 406), we aimed to use ‘psychogeographical mapping as a means of exploring and trying to change the city’. In discussion with the seven sisters collective, we intended to counter the spatial abstraction, authorship, and agency that the cadastral plan represented. We appropriated the cadastral plan, enlarging and distorting its scale into a figure that was almost three meters high and six meters across. We invited the women to cut up the map along and across the cadastral lines, and project their own

**Figure 5**

Village rentiers planning new streets on the cadastral plan of Naharpur Kasan, near Kapashera during the meeting of the village council. The cadastral plan serves as a de facto masterplan through which the male landowners exert dominance over spatial production in settlements like Kapashera. **Credits: Nitin Bathla**



<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre discusses abstract space in extension to the Marxist concept of alienation, which works to separate people from land. He problematises the frightening capacity of state bureaucracy in buttressing abstract space through non-critical (positive) knowledge and exerting violence thus enabling capitalism to lay hold of it (1974, p. 52).

cartographies onto them. Over the next three months, the women drew upon stories from their personal encounters with land, power, and ecology. These cartographies dealt with translocal issues of ethnicity, gender, ecology, public space, and ideas of play. Some responded to local moments in Kapashera, some to distant villages or encounters. The cartographies were also non-linear in terms of their temporality, with the women often bringing childhood entanglements, with their present as well as future projections on the same map.

In the first few weeks, the cartographies required mediation from us, as the women felt traumatised by the years of assembly style factory work that suppressed their self-expression. However, the women soon were able to take over the creative direction of the tapestry as their canvas that they were embroidering upon. Their individual cartographies started to come together as a tapestry with juxtapositions and intersections that drew upon the agrarian history of Kapashera, its tenementisation, and uneven development in relation to distant places. Importantly however, the tapestry started to emerge as a material archive of their life stories, everyday struggles, and ways of subverting patriarchy (figure 6).

**Figure 6**

Women from the seven sisters collective holding the tapestry.

Credits: Bhavyaa Parashar.



**Figure 7**

An overall view of the section on planetary commodity map in the tapestry. Credits: Bhavyaa Parashar.



This shift towards collaborative participation was a moment when the lines between artist and community started to blur and it started to become increasingly difficult to define one from the other. These moments of crossover were often triggered by the sharing of the embodied experience of the women over everyday life in Kapashera. To illustrate this, one day Bhibha, a woman from the collective, came to the studio with bruises. Upon discussing this with her, the issue of alcohol related domestic violence emerged. To this, the women responded by mapping out the geography of alcohol consumption within the community. This map depicts illicit bars, and the geography of violence in the community. Several similar cartographies shaped up around rental violence and surveillance among other things.

Furthermore, during our discussions in the collective, we realized that there was a keen consciousness among the community with regards to the planetary entanglement of Kapashera. They were keenly aware of the geographies where the companies they work send their finished products to, and from which locations the raw materials arrived. This network of planetary associations and metabolic flux of commodities became a part of the cosmology of their tapestry. The tapestry thus started to emerge as a tool for collectivising a plurality of other worlds and ways of being, while simultaneously serving as a projection for a collective future. A tool for social engagement through which memories could be expressed, projected, and archived, thus being simultaneously syncretic, generative, and productive.

### **Let us stitch another city! The tapestry travels beyond**

While Studio Otherworlds served as an important site for developing ideas, the collective, and the tapestry, our intention through this inquiry was to instigate transformative encounters. This necessitated multi-sited workshops in the larger community of Kapashera and beyond. Furthermore, during our discussions with the women, we felt that they took pride in the tapestry and wanted to travel beyond the space with it. This they felt could allow the conversations that they had been having within the stitching circle to be directed towards a larger public. Moreover, we felt that this allowed a transcendental moment for attaching to latent possibilities of action beyond the space in alliance with social movements in Kapashera and the rest of the city.

This was also a time when art was being actively utilised for public protests in Delhi, especially by women against discriminatory governmental action such as the notorious Citizenship Amendment Act (Ghertner & Govil, 2020). While the tapestry, just like the urban fabric of a city, is inherently incomplete as a project, it also allowed us the possibility for a truly multi-sited and mobile engagement. We prepared the tapestry such that it could be ephemerally suspended in public spaces such as parks and squares from trees and poles. We organised a number of public workshops (over 20 pop-ups in the span of two months) across a multitude of public spaces in Delhi. There was a vast diversity in the location of these workshops including public parks in the centre of the city such as Lodhi Gardens to the labour square in Kapashera, where migrant workers look for daily wage work.

The tapestry served as a backdrop for performative action, whereby the women would continue to stitch their stories and invite passers-by into their circle. During this process of

**Figure 8**

A public workshop that we organised at Lodhi Gardens in central Delhi in late January. We spread the tapestry on the grass and the women co-produced artefacts for the tapestry in dialogue with passers-by.  
Credits: Aishwarya Ashok



co-production, the women would often share their experiences of making the pieces, and discuss, and bring into relation their struggles. Within Kapashera, these public workshops triggered some interesting conversations over domestic abuse and gendered violence. Furthermore, these encounters greatly empowered the agency of the women in their politics of resistance and initiated several other conversations and collaborations. Of these, some served as starting points for several other ongoing tapestries with students, planners, and artists from various parts of Delhi and with the larger community of Kapashera itself. Furthermore, we organised a number of public workshops in Kapashera through which we attempted to form a bridge between the community and civil society actors working on similar questions across Delhi (Srivastava, 2020).

These tapestries conducted in collaboration between the women's collective and civil society groups across Delhi challenge the ideas of unequal and uneven spatial production and offer an alternative vision for the city. Under the *'Main bhi Dilli'* campaign of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS), for example, we attempted to explore how the tapestry method could empower an alternative way of producing the city's masterplan. While within Kapashera, we began exploring how the tapestry method could translate into a collective production of alternate visions for Kapashera, one that breaks across class and social barriers. The exercise of tapestry making and stitching becomes a tool for drawing visions with the community for 'another city' and beyond; it serves as a means to express and solicit cross-solidarities (figure 4).

## **Conclusion – Methodological Fluidity: Participation, aesthetics, and the audience**

In conclusion to this article we would like to reflect again upon participation, aesthetics, and audience in socially engaged art. The public workshops we conducted allowed us to address many of these questions by bringing different constituents, their worlds, and tools in tension with each other. The temporary snatching away of subjects as we discussed in relation to socially engaged art in a previous section applies also to the audience of art itself. During the public workshops, we realised that not only does the line between artists and community become blurry, but the same can happen with the very idea of audience itself. Through attaching itself to the sites of everyday publicness, the audience can be absorbed as active collaborators for transformative change as well.

Furthermore, this emergence of an aesthetic expression inductively not only opens the possibility for a deeper engagement with the community, but also helps push the boundaries of aesthetic production in art. This came to our notice during an exposition conducted with the students of Social Design at Ambedkar University in Delhi. The students highlighted how the choice of colours, proportions, perspectives, motifs, and patterns used by the women was very peculiar and unique. The students allowed us to make connections between the vernacular traditions of the regions where the women come from and their translation of these into their lived reality as migrants in Kapashera. This along with the narratives and songs they produced in the stitching circle produces an ‘urban sensorium’ (Goonewardena, 2005), an aesthetic for politics to transform the city. Furthermore, this allows for collaborative and collective possibilities in participation with artists, civil society groups, and activists.

The performance of gender and social hierarchies is an important element that is utilised in the casting of labour migrants as permanently temporary bodies in Kapashera. At the beginning of our engagement, we were often confronted with questions from the community such as: why anyone would be interested in our stories, or who are we. We found that the women felt belittled by the performance of hierarchies of caste, religion and gender like ‘ants among elephants’, to use the metaphor of the famous Indian literary author Sujatha Gidla (2017). A major transformative moment in the project occurred when we felt the agency of the women in challenging these hierarchies shift. This was triggered by an active participation of the women in aesthetic and material production. As the tapestry was produced through participation with the collective, it enticed a sense of collective pride among the women that manifested in their encounters during the public workshops.

During a public workshop in Kapashera, for example, one of the women from the collective stood up to speak before a politician from the local rentier class. She not only presented the tapestry as an alternate future of Kapashera, but also defied hierarchies and normativity projected on her presence in Kapashera. This act was a part of a larger shift in the way the women constructed the world around them through collective participation and narrative storytelling more flatly.

In conclusion then, socially engaged art offers a fluid methodology for crossover between activism and praxis, allowing an opportunity for knowledge production in direct engagement with the community. During the project, we observed that our long-term community art engagement led to the blurring of boundaries between the artists and the community. Moreover, it provided a space for radical encounters and an opportunity for systemic change. Through our project, we were able to subvert the map as an instrument of power and open a pathway towards bringing it back to common use. While as Matthew Thompson (2017) highlights, such projects do not offer an overarching solution to the complex challenges of housing and urban change, they can go a long way in helping empower latent possibilities as radical politics.

**Figure 9**

An art piece drawn by Anita from the women's collective during the early days of the COVID lockdown. She depicts people frightened by the virus walking the streets of Kapashera, covering their faces with cloth and struggling to maintain distance in the cramped lanes of Kapashera.

**Source: Authors**



### **Epilogue - Art as an infrastructure of solidarity under a pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown imposed in its aftermath not only abruptly halted the possibilities of public interaction, but it also intensified social violence faced by the community. Government programs and rental waivers did not permeate into 'gray zones' such as Kapashera for obvious reasons, triggering an uncanny migration crisis (Bathla, 2020b). While we could not physically be present within the community while the crisis was unfolding, we continued to stay in touch with the community virtually on a daily basis. While most factories shut shop for a couple of months, the art grant provided an opportunity for sustenance. Furthermore, as multiple unspoken atrocities unfolded under the lockdown, the art project allowed the community to express, come to terms, and attempt to demonstrate alternative possibilities. The women continued to document stories under the lockdown and send us images through smartphones they had access to through their neighbours and relatives. This became an important material archive of the life under the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The archive can be found online along with the stories and authors who produced them at - <https://www.studiootherworlds.com/copy-of-about>

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