Gold: Stories of a City

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Njanappilly Vivek Vijayan
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Thesis statement

“To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”
-Walter Benjamin, The work of art in the era of mechanical reproductions

The thesis explores the latent influences of gold and its value systems on the urban geo-politics of a South Indian city. It is an anthology of sporadic narrations recording the growth and transformation of a city over time. These narrative compositions contain traces of the past, the city of the present and speculative futures. They indicate change without erasure. Their values are embodied in gold: malleable, ductile and fungible in its different forms.

As the largest hoarder of gold commodities in the world, India’s relationship with the precious metal transcends the definitions of a mere obsession. It percolates through traditions and beliefs extending from religion to economy, politics to trade; acting both as form and signifier, material and language. As a result, it frames the primary and imagined urban geo-politics of a number of burgeoning cities within the country. Delving into sections of the complex landscape of a city in India, the Thesis projects a pattern of growth organized by the latent value systems of a commodity that defines the city. This is actualized through the use of five disparate yet connected narrative structures that deal with specific architectural typologies and their relationship to gold. These “stories” are revealed by short movie montages that are eventually framed as overlaid sheet compositions.

The intention of the thesis is not to merely speak of a specific commodity nor is it to narrate the history of a city. It is an attempt to overlay and map the synthetic geographies of the city and to perhaps articulate a method of engaging its future implications. The Thesis devalues the very precious and staid nature of the commodity in question, it instead employs it as an operative element; cutting through the most interesting sections of the city.
“To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”

-Walter Benjamin, The work of art in the era of mechanical reproductions

Gold re-appropriated as crafted object or reproduced commodity

*Walter Benjamin, Work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction

*Keller Easterling, Extrastatecraft

Gold valued through different operating systems
"To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return."

-Walter Benjamin, The work of art in the era of mechanical reproductions

Value systems embodied in geo-political architectural form

Compositions extend narratives of gold, its value systems, the forms that embody them and the city it defines

* Vittorio Aureli, The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture
* Swati Chattopadyay, Unlearning the City
Smuggled gold has entered the city through sea and airports as it has grown and developed. Security systems are unable to pick up minute traces of gold hidden in passenger bodies amidst heavy air traffic. A new invisible threshold is introduced at the edge of the city, an architecture of hyper-surveillance. Jet bridges act as scanning machines and passports as recording devices, archiving the footprints of those entering the city.
Smuggled gold arriving at seaport

Airport surveillance & invisible threshold

Overlaid composition
ii.

**Elephant paths**

In some south Indian cities, the embellished Elephant is a symbol of prosperity & auspicious beginnings.

Every year city streets that were once elephant paths are reclaimed by temporary pavilions known as “pandals”. The festival has rows of elephants embellished in gold symbolizing the rich culture of the city. Eventually, the festival becomes a global tourist attraction. The city center is converted into an eternal elephant path. Temporary pandals turn into permanent infrastructure in the form of viewing bridges looking down at the passing elephants.
Layers

"Pandal" bridge & Elephant paths

City traffic blocked by "pandal"

Overlaid composition
iii.

**Temple vaults**

Religious shrines embody the geopolitics of ancient Indian dynasties while idols of gold embody their “divine” authority.

Royal wealth in the form of gold was hidden under the ancient temple; marked by a sacred tree at the center of the city. It protected the wealth from plunder at the end of the colonial era. Decades later the Temple with the tree was announced a heritage site and the treasure worth trillions of dollars was discovered. It is turned into a museum that chronicles the history of the city in gold. It represents the geo-political clout of a single tree at the center of the city.
Layers

Hidden wealth in the colonial era

Museum of gold under the sacred tree

Overlaid composition


iv. \textit{Wedding stores}

“For a decade, India has been the largest consumer of gold jewellery, accounting for 75% of its total imports.”
- World Gold Council, 2017

The city consumes most of its gold in the form of jewellery. Business that started with traditional craftsmen eventually were replaced by big box stores selling jewellery for festivals and weddings. A new typology is born where massive stores incorporate entire event and marriage halls. Hyper-advertised traditions are impregnate gargantuan boxes of commodities creating an eternal cycle of consumption.
Layers

Big box typology with wedding space

Old jewellery store with traditional craftsmen

Overlaid composition
Gold is considered a safe investment against the dollar, and stock values rose during the 2008 financial crash.

Gold as a safe investment against the dollar sees a great spike in its stock prices. In addition, generations of Non Resident Indians (NRIs) working in Gulf countries return to the city. Paddy fields at the edge of the city turn into suburban islands. Developments have little to do with the city they abut nor do they successfully mimic the grand cities they aspire to be. Generic towers with display facades meant only to be seen from the sky.

Investment islands

Video brochures for loans and investments
Layers

Suburban islands & investment towers

Paddy fields at the edge of the city

Overlaid composition
Thesis exhibition

Exhibition layout #3

Final presentation, 25th April, 2017