L'urbanistica del distacco

Urbanism of Detachment

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Negli ultimi anni, c'è stata una straordinaria intensificazione delle pratiche di pellegrinaggio, che si è tradotta nella necessità di strutture urbane più grandi e più frequenti per ospitare enormi raduni. Il caso del Kumbh Mela, una leggendaria festa indù in India, fissa gli standard per la comprensione di modi alternativi per costruire città transitorie con una temporalità in linea con la natura effimera di enormi flussi umani. Questo massiccio raduno culturale, che risulta la più grande mega città effimera del mondo e accoglie 3 milioni di pellegrini ogni 12 anni, genera un caso estremo che ci costringe a riflettere profondamente sul modo in cui possiamo pensare più ampiamente le città del futuro e da cui possiamo estrapolare diverse lezioni per quanto riguarda un "concetto aperto" di architettura, di progettazione urbana e di politica di pianificazione più elastico.

In recent years, there has been an ex¬traordinary intensification of pilgrimage practices, which has translated into the need of larger and more frequently constructed urban structures for hosting massive gatherings. The case of the Kumbh Mela, a legendary Hindu festival in India, sets the standards for understanding alternative ways of building cities that are transitory and with a temporality aligned with the ephemeral nature of massive human flows. This massive cultural gathering, resulting in the biggest ephemeral mega city in the world accommodating 3 million pilgrims every 12 years, generates an extreme case that forces us to reflect deeply about the way we may think of future cities more broadly and from which we can extrapolate several lessons regarding more resilient, "open concept" of architecture, urban design and planning policy.

Parole chiave: **Kumbh Mela; Urbanistica effimera; Paesaggio; Temporalità; Tempo**

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Andrea Branzi's ten recommendations for the construction of a 'New Athens Charter' offered critical provocations for radically re-thinking the urban as more holistic and less a Eurocentric project. Out of the ten recommendations he makes, his third recommendation seems to point directly to the construction of a new notion of 'time' in a city that should be thought as a place for 'cosmic hospitality' in which designers would "encourage 'planetary coexistence' between man and animals, technology and divinities, living and dead" and that would look in particular to Indian landscapes as models for cities that are "less anthropocentric and more open to biodiversity, to the sacred, and to human beauty"[1]

While it would be easy to argue that the modern rational, which has been the basis of design practices and generated productive conversations and outcomes in the past, today is insufficient for thinking at the current condition of cities. The world expanded and became connected in a way that forces us to rebuild a set of certainties that previously had as referents Europe and North America, pushing us to open the discussion to include the great potential and intellectual wealth that one can gain from looking closely at the geographies below the line of the equator. What would happen

if we follow Andrea Branzi's advice and schizophrenically start to seriously embrace lessons from these geographies and apply them to the production of the contemporary city; if we decide to replace some of the rational dynamics inherited from modernity? What could we learn?

An urbanism of detachment, as stated in the title, would be a mediator, an invitation to search for nuances; to negotiate the forces through which the city truly expresses itself; to soften the social divide; to advocate for blurring limits between the contemporary and historic and; to create provocations that overcome the separation between the static and the kinetic, or the permanent versus the ephemeral, in the production of cities.

In recent years, for instance, there has been an extraordinary intensification of pilgrimage practices, which has translated into the need of larger and more frequently constructed structures for hosting massive gatherings.[2] Extreme examples of temporary religious cities are ephemeral constructions set up for the Hajj, as well as a series of temporary cities constructed in India for hosting celebrations such as the *Durga Puja*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, and *Kumbh Mela*—the last a religious pilgrimage that, according to official figures, supports the congregation of more than 100 million people. These events are an expression of a range of ephemeral configurations deployed to accommodate

gatherings that celebrate religious beliefs.

Looking at the whole ecology generated by human flows there is one case that stands out as an extreme condition: *The Kumbh Mela*. Probably mobilizing the biggest pilgrimage in contemporary times, religious in most cases but also non-religious in many cases, the *Kumbh Mela* sets the standards for understanding alternative ways of building cities; albeit transitory and with a temporality aligned with the ephemeral nature of massive human flows. This massive gathering resulting in the biggest ephemeral megacity in the world, generates an extreme case that forces us to reflect deeply about the way we think about cities more broadly, and from which several lessons and ideas can be extracted.

This paper reflects on two key attributes of the ephemeral city of the *Kumbh Mela* and the lessons we can extrapolate from it to architecture, urban design and planning. When we look at the impressive images of the ephemeral city, we tend to fix the eye onto the incommensurable extension the city has when it is in operation. However, what is most remarkable about the *Kumbh Mela* is that not only is it constructed in such a short period of time, but also that it has the ability to be as quickly disassembled. The *Kumbh Mela* raises a nuanced set of questions about how 'reversibility' could be better imagined in the production of future cities. In a matter of weeks

the biggest public gathering in the world deploys its own roads, pontoon bridges, cotton tents serving as residences and venues for spiritual meetings, and a spectrum of social infrastructure — all replicating the functions of an actual city. This pop-up megacity serves 5 to 7 million people who gather for 55 days, and an additional flux of 10 to 20 million people who come for 24-hour cycles on the five main bathing dates. Once the festival is over the whole city is disassembled as quickly as it was deployed, reversing the constructive operation, disaggregating the settlement to its basic components and recycling a majority of the material used.

The *Kumbh Mela*, a legendary Hindu festival, occurs every twelve years in four Indian cities: Haridwar, Allahabad, Nashik and Ujjain. The mythological origin of the festival comes from a legend, which narrates that during a battle between gods (*devas*) and demons (*asuras*), four drops of the sacred nectar of immortality, *amrit*, fell in the four cities where now this festival is performed. It is believed that the relationship between the planet Jupiter and the sun replicates the celestial map that witnessed the battle and the sacred rivers in which the drops fell acquire the power of providing enormous spiritual benefits. On these dates millions of pilgrims gather during the month of *Magha* to dwell in the site of the *Kumbh*. Holy men, devotees, pilgrims, foreigners and various

Fig. 1 - Aerial view of Ganges River at Allahabad site of *Kumbh Mela*
Source: Courtesy of Allahabad Kumbh Administration Authority

Fig. 2 - Figure 2. Ritual cultural ceremonies
Source: Courtesy of Siddiqui Ganesh Danesh

kinds of people get together in the world's biggest public gathering for experiencing these perceived sacred benefits. (Fig. 1, 2)

The *Kumbh Mela* is more important, more sacred, and more visited when it happens at Allahabad, at the confluence of three sacred rivers. Today two of those rivers are visible, the Ganges and the Yamuna, while the third is a mythical river named *"Saraswati"* that appears only in the sacred texts and currently is assumed to be under ground. The attention given to this festival in relation to other points of pilgrimage, in the Sanskrit text known as *Puranas* and *Vedas*, has legitimized the importance of this festival since the Gupta period. Holy narratives that relate gods and their events with geography connect sacred places denominated as *tirthas*, which are conceived as points in which the thresholds between the divine and the mundane get blurred.[3] Among the *tirthas* Allahabad has the category of *tirtharaja* that means "the king of the sacred places." This place is said to be the holiest place existing in the three worlds: heaven, earth, and netherworld.[4] *Prayaga* (original name of Allahabad) is also known as the *Triveni*, which means the encounter of three sacred rivers *Ganga – Yamuna – Saraswati.* The temporary city of Allahabad is situated right on the floodplain and its development is coordinated with the shifting condition of the ground. Without seeing images of the

Kumbh Mela, one could hardly believe that a complex (ephemeral) mega city of such extensive scale could be even deployed at such a short and compressed time span – even using all the technological instruments and disciplinary knowledge that we currently possess. However, it is precisely in the lack of technological specificity and reversibility, as an a-priori constraint for deployment, where its robustness relies. Therefore, one of the most valuable lessons offered by the *Kumbh Mela* is in the implementation of tactics that allow the deployment of a whole city as a holding strategy for temporary urban processes that does not aspire to be permanent. It is in the non-permanent solution for a non-permanent problem that is the *raison de etre* of the city. This alignment between the temporary nature of the problem (in this case to host millions of people for 55 days) and that of the solution, is something, we could, and should, incorporate as a basic protocol for the cities we reshape and create in the future.

Reversibility can be examined in two contrasting dimensions. On one hand, in its material aspects this translates into a physical reversibility of the constructed armature that supports the existence of the *Kumbh Mela*. On the other hand, the immaterial agreement frames a reversible political and institutional framework that supports the construction and organization

of the ephemeral city. While in the context of more permanent settlements, institutions associated with urban processes take time to form and are created often not as malleable and flexible structures; in the case of the *Kumbh Mela* a flexible temporary governance system is quickly created. It plugs into a pre-existing urban management system at the state level and draws its expertise from existing institutions – often pulling together for a short period of twelve months the best administrators in the state. During the festival the area of the *Kumbh Mela*, in terms of its institutional framework, becomes an autonomous city managed by several temporary governmental agencies that have jurisdiction over the site. (Fig. 3)

The institutional structure that manages the city evolves, depending upon the stage in which they operate. The deployment of the city can be then divided into four main stages that affect the nature of its governance. The four phases are as follows: First is an initial phase of planning, which is held outside the physical space of the *Kumbh* and that involves government authorities that range from the local to the national level. This is followed by the implementation phase that happens both in the peripheries of the site while the river is still high and on site when the river Ganges and Yamuna recede. Third, the process phase of management takes place that

corresponds to the period in which the city is in operation. The challenges of this phase include handling the vast crowds of people and the administration of a river that might fluctuate or shift in its trajectory by thirty feet per day. And finally the deconstruction stage starts after the last bathing day and is the process that reprograms the space into agricultural fields for a few weeks before the Ganges floods again in the monsoon and reclaims the site of the city.

The administration of the city is implemented by an organizational structure that is not only impermanent – which is something one could expect given its temporal condition – but that is also flexible, allowing the progressive appearance of transversal links of communication across diverse hierarchies. This is clear when one examines the nature of the meetings and the authority each member has during different moments of the city's deployment. Relations of power and connections vary depending of the stage of the deployment. During the planning stage interactions are framed in departmental meetings, which are small in scale and where the authority mostly resides in representatives of the state. In this process twenty-eight departments from the state of Uttar Pradesh are engaged as well as seven different central departments from the national government. When the implementation stage arrives the

Fig. 3 - Highly heterogeneous handmade, modular built environments
Source: Courtesy of Felipe Vera

governance system gets more dynamic, articulating constituencies at different levels that get represented on-site. During the implementation stage diverse mechanisms of feedback among different levels within the hierarchies get set up in order to deal with the need for quick decisions of adjustment to the materialization of the plan. The dynamism of the structure reaches its climax while the city is in operation. At this time authority shifts from the high levels of the management pyramid that operate at the state and regional levels, to the ground based administration of the *Kumbh*. Crucial is the fact that the *Kumbh* administration meets on the ground each evening during the festival in a dynamic that connects with every single level of the otherwise hierarchical administrative structure. This gives the administrator for the event the capacity to react to any unpredicted incident or requirement of the city quickly and effectively, bypassing when necessary inefficient bureaucratic clearance processes. Once the whole process is over administrators are often promoted and get reappointed again into the pre-existing governmental structure. The whole institutional framework that temporarily supported such an enormous operation vanishes like the traces of the city when the river washes over the terrain during the flooding from the seasonal monsoon rains.

Reversibility is also the main attribute of the physical deployment of the city. The implementation strategy, which is generic and employs low-tech constructive technics, allows the most amazing buildings and morphologies to be shaped, leaving open the possibility of reversing such operations once the festival is finished. This strategy also allows the building materials to be reincorporated into regional economies and local industries. Each of the few building techniques implemented at the *Kumbh* are based on the repetition and recombination of a basic module with simple interconnections. This is usually a stick (approximately 6 to 8 feet long) that by aggregation generates diverse enclosures in a wide range of forms, from small tents to complex building paraphernalia, which give expression to diverse social institutions such as theaters, monuments, temples, hospitals, etc. Most of the materials come from the state of Uttar Pradesh, as does the workforce. The architecture of the city is often constructed out of the same elements: bamboo sticks used as framework; to laminar materials, such as corrugated metal and fabric. The simplicity of the building systems not only facilitates the attributes for assembly, reconfiguration, and disassembly on site, but also facilitates the logistics and channels of distribution for each component and piece. One person or groups of people provide the modulation of every material such that they can be carried and handled in absence of heavy machinery. Material components are small and light enough to be easily transported and distributed to every corner of the settlement in a rapid and efficient manner, facilitating construction and reconstruction, as well as formation and reabsorption into the various ecologies and geographies of the region. Everything is constructed and afterwards deconstructed with equal ease. (Fig. 4)

The whole *Kumbh nagri* (or township) starts to get dismantled after the last major bathing. The disassembly of *akharas's* camps and Ashrams start with the devotees taking their things by different means – cars, trucks or tractors – while chief organizers of each religious order and their *chelas* (juniors) stay until the last day. When a religious order is ready to leave the *Kumbh*, they get in touch with the contactor that constructed their camp, doing so either directly, if they paid for the camp themselves, or through the sector magistrate if the camp was constructed with funding from the *Mela* administrator. Days are arranged for trucks and workers to arrive to remove all the material – the tents, plywood, and steel sheets that formed fences, bamboos, and every component of the camp. Once disassembled, the material is taken to the compounds to be stored, counted, and sorted for damaged pieces. After that, different elements are sent to tent

suppliers all over India in trucks, with every truck carrying one specific type of material.

A great part of the infrastructure is also disassembled once the *Kumbh* is over. For instance, by digging up wastewater and water supply pipes *Jal Nigam* contractors removed all the tap connections. In the same way that tents are deconstructed and separated by materials to be returned to their original supplier, tap connections, motors, and pipes return to the Jal Nigam store from which they were ordered. Once there, the materials are reused in different locations of Uttar Pradesh in other Jal Nigam projects. The tube wells get a meter long pipe welded to their top in order to extend their height and prevent the river from filling them up.

Parts of the infrastructure remain on site. Sewage pits, for instance, get uncovered from their bamboo structures, treated with chemicals and covered with sand; the same is done with water reservoirs. Other kinds of infrastructure, like sandbags and toilets, get removed. In the case of the toilets built by the *Mela* administration, which is one of the most dispersed infrastructure of the site, the sweepers community is in charge of removing the ceramic seats to take to the main health store location. The rest of the materials, like bricks and bamboo, are sold to different contractors to be reused in other locations. The same happens with electricity infrastructure. Wires are taken

Fig. 4 - Generic building solutions always open to combinations
Source: Courtesy of Felipe Vera

down and wound up, and concrete poles and metal pieces are disassembled and taken back to storage. Special electricity boards keep a digital inventory in which every item is registered.

Roads and pontoons are also taken apart sector by sector and taken to three main storage locations in the area, one in the parade ground, the second near the railway yard, and the largest in Jhusi, next to the bus stand. Bridges are broken up into parts, first the railings are dismantled, then the plates, and finally the joists and pontoons. Once all the material is disassembled the state government decides where to allocate the bridges and roads, depending on the different district needs but mostly in villages with mud roads and prone to flooding. Once decided, the infrastructure is distributed and reconstructed in diverse locations of Uttar Pradesh.

Not only construction material gets reused after the *Mela* ends, but even waste becomes a resource to be taken off site. A large number of scavengers from areas in and around Allahabad arrive at the site. They dig up waste coal dumped by restaurants to use as fuel; they empty the sand bags from which the *ghats* were constructed to make ropes. They take any discarded wood or bamboo to burn on their fires. Scavengers take almost everything, cleaning up the site completely. Organic material that is left

behind, such as sandbags and bamboo poles, gradually disintegrate. Over time winds blur remaining patterns in the landscape. Once the deconstruction activity is over the site begins to reestablish its yearly patterns. People from villages around the site start preparing beds for planting seasonal vegetables like cucumber and seasonal gourds. Thick grass left by holy men is burned for making the soil more fertile and small wells are built nearby. The cremation ground on sector five is reestablished and every day uses of the river border recolonize the space.

Looking at the process just described, one is reminded that perhaps the most revolutionary opportunities for redefining the ways in which we produce the built environment perhaps lie in much simpler low-tech tactics. What is most remarkable about the *Kumbh* is not that it is constructed in such a short period of time, but also that it has the ability to get disassembled just as quickly. Multiple, highly heterogeneous, structures are organized around combinatory systems that rely on minimal building strategies. Construction techniques used also allow greater degrees of flexibility. The generic condition of basic elements like sticks connected by rope, or simple nails in both orthogonal and diagonal relationships, offer infinite possibilities of recombination. The strength is in the capacity of achieving

specific and determinate forms with a couple of indeterminate solutions applicable in different contexts and that are re-adjustable at any moment. On account of this 'a kit of parts' approach, the material used for erecting tents, gathering spaces and even monuments that are several meters high can be afterwards reused in other constructions. (Fig. 5)

This reversible condition becomes in a way a counterpoint to our contemporary building culture, to the one aspect that has been notoriously absent from the current debate, the afterlife of the things we build once they are not useful anymore. Today buildings are constructed to last as long as possible and usually the need for transformation, the smart incorporation of weathering and the provision of options for reconfiguration in cases of obsolescence are not appropriately factored in the designs. We have developed a highly articulated technique for constructing and assembling all sorts of structures, which allow us to handle more complex and efficient construction processes. However, very little has been imagined in relation to advancing in the development of more efficient ways to disassemble and deconstruct the things we build. Paradoxically, what we can learn from the *Kumbh Mela* is that the most unsustainable practices do not rely on the construction of the built environment, but in how inefficient

Fig.5 - Globe Trading Company: People gather near the empty historic Globe Trading Company building to participate in a community event.
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we are in dealing with the reconfigurations of the space that we already have built. Unfortunately, in more permanent settings demolition has been the generalized answer for opening up space that the city requires for growth and adapting to new needs. In short, the lack of incorporation of strategies for disassembly as an inherent part of the design imagination, as well as construction protocols, obstruct the fluid and sustainable metabolism of contemporary urban space.

Therefore, in a context in which the introduction of digital tools in the production of the built environment has undoubtedly become an unstoppable force behind innovation in the disciplines associated with the construction of the built environment, perhaps the most revolutionary opportunities for redefining the ways in which we produce the constructed space are much more fruitful in simple and low-tech tactics. Downscaling to the more specific technical elements that allow the deployment of the ephemeral city, we can see how the technology implemented at the *Kumbh* can provide several lessons as well as challenging several assumptions of current design practices.

The city of the Kumbh Mela challenges the idea of design as a linear, top down, over-determinate, equilibrated, integrated, and contextual effort. As Charles Waldheim thoughtfully describes in ʿOn Landscape, Ecology and other Modifiers to Urbanismʾ,[5]

under current conditions, incompletion and spatial-temporal openness is becoming central when addressing urban questions in contemporary cities. It is in this context that temporary urban intensity – vis-à-vis permanent and accomplished density– has only gained in agency in successfully shaping urban spaces. Acknowledging that – unlike what happens in landscape practice – the focus in urbanism is still mostly placed on the achievement of discreet close solutions rather than on generation of open-ended systems. Hence, today we are forced to rethink what we consider being a desirable outcome of urban design at multiple scales, under the light of current, extreme conditions. In parallel, over the past decades, technology has empowered designers with the ability of controlling form and matter in a way that we never imagined before. Also, we now have the capacity to anticipate the future by modeling natural and artificial processes using mapping techniques, and representing complex dynamics informing design operations. The emergence of a complete new world of possibilities, especially in digital design and fabrication, has come with the promise of a stronger capacity of design for dominating form, space, growth, and performance of the city. Fueled by the ambition of being able to ʿmake almost everythingʾ new techniques present the opportunity for restructuring

design and planning processes around immaterial or ʿpaperlessʾ fictions, rendering the project of design increasingly as a much more specific and complete construction.

However, challenging this tendency, several aspects of the *Kumbh Mela* reminds us of how important and powerful it is to understand design as an incomplete, circular, and intentionally unbalanced operation. The process by which the city of the *Kumbh Mela* is assembled, managed, and deconstructed presents an opportunity for learning about scenarios in which cities, as unfinished open systems, accommodate diverse temporalities as part of their own material discourse, and where time is at heart – indeed perhaps the heart itself – of the city's construction, form, and technique.

According to Richard Sennett, for example, in a city ʿopenʾ means: incomplete, errant, conflictual, and non-linear.[6] In the same line the *Kumbh Mela* settlement presents us with a project that is not just made for people, but one in which the guidelines of the city are given to people – literally – as an open template to be developed, transformed, and materialized. In this regard it is interesting to see how the city of the *Kumbh Mela* as a project is not defined in detail as a fixed plan; it is neither a closed definition of buildings or plots, but something in between an idea and a map. It is thought more as a set of relationships

between components that get organized and progressively specified, after the city –as a conceptual drawing– lands in the shifting geography of the floodplains. The stage of physical materialization is also informed by several negotiations, happening on the ground, between *Akharas*, dwellers and other visitors that last until a spatial agreement is reached. The adaptation to dynamic geographical processes and the dialogue between diverse agents help to progressively complete the form of the city.

Once the project of the city gets grounded and completed several limits start to appear within the *nagri*, designating spaces, all diverse in nature and function, generating all sorts of forms and morphological expressions. It is useful to see how when comparing open and closed systems at the urban scale, Sennett distinguishes that "the closed city is full of boundaries and walls" while "the open city possesses more borders and membranes." In this case, the almost complete absence of massive walls, replaced by thin sheets of different kinds, nuances much more the divide between spaces. Every limit is in a way almost completely permeable and at the same time functions as a separation. Even though the border condition is still recognized as a divider and contributes to create diversity in size, permeability is omnipresent in the character of the

space. At the *Kumbh* divisions are not just separations, but actually vertical limits that are porous layers mediating connections, relationships and creating ephemeral, but powerful, spatial narratives.

The porous borders at the *Kumbh* manifest not only in the physical and planning structure of the city, but also in interesting patterns of space occupation and internal organization, which are motivated by a deep sense of communality.

In the ephemeral city, public, private, and sacred spaces are at the same time blended and distinguished. For instance, one of the aspects that exemplified this most clearly is the patterns of space occupation generated by how food is arranged at the *Kumbh*. Very few shops, stalls, and street vendors are seen along the temporal roads of the *Kumbh*. While there was some interesting commerce on the streets comprised of a few small cafes and stalls selling shampoo, religious items, and trinkets, typically clustered at major intersections, big stores for food trading were completely absent. Unlike what one would think, the *Kumbh* does not have an established formal trading system inside its boundaries. Food is brought by religious orders, pilgrims, and visitors, and a great part of it is distributed for free in large tents that cover big spans providing big free spaces for people to sit in rows and eat together.

Outside the limits of the settlement at the border of the permanent city, markets are set up for trading very different things, ranging from food to clothing. Talking with vendors we realized that sometimes stalls are rented for several years and the same people run small businesses in different *Melas*, most of them from nearby Uttar Pradesh cities. Most of the goods are brought from the Jhusi market and vegetable stalls provide interim help by covering the gap between what is needed and what religious orders can bring with them. In addition, some of the vending and transactions occur through small stalls that are spontaneously set up along some avenues. Interestingly, this form of market is not as omnipresent as one might expect, and occurs on only a few streets that house the large *Akharas* or are part of major thoroughfares of the temporary city. Perhaps the frugal nature of the way most people dwell at the *Kumbh Mela* diminishes the compulsion to buy. For most visitors it is essentially a retreat or religious pilgrimage.

The three million people that normally dwell at the *Kumbh* get their food in the *Langar* where massive communal meals are hosted by each *Akhara* three times a day, at which, according to some of our interviews, over 100,000 pilgrims eat a simple meal during the busiest days of the *Mela*. Each *Akhara* and Ashram has its own corps of volunteers that organize these gatherings, cook the

food, take care of supplies, and the cleanup. They draw upon the regional resources of the *Kumbh*, sending representatives several times a week to wholesale markets in the outskirts of Allahabad, Jhunsi and Naini to purchase fresh vegetables from local farms. They also aggregate the small amounts of fresh vegetables, rice, and flour that many pilgrims bring as contributions. Finally, although the *Mela* Administration organizes shops for grain, rice, and oil, *Akharas* and Ashrams bring their own sticks of rice, flour, and firewood from their Ashrams in Punjab, Kashmir, and every corner of India. Each *Akhara* is, in a sense, a self-contained managerial cell for shelter and services of its members and guests.

The porous limits of the *Kumbh* are not only physical, but are also constructed by vertical elements, such as flags placed in the center of the *Akharas* designating sacred space, defining a completely different set of rules structured by immaterial demarcations. In accordance with tradition, the area for each sect is organized around an identifying flag that, standing in the center of the space, is clearly visible from the street. The flag shows the identity of the *Akhara* and the older one, *Juna Akhara*, has a bigger flag. So far, we have identified this as a highly particular kind of demarcation that is used for the *Kumbh Mela* as a strategy not only for demarcating space, but also for

constructing place. Areas for the tents of the gurus and their followers are distributed around the flag, with the most prominent gurus located along the path from the main entrance to the flag. The importance of each guru is connected with the number of devotees he attracts, which is manifested spatially in the organization of space at the *Kumbh Mela*: locations with prime exposure are given to more prominent gurus, allowing them to gather more potential followers. When one teacher's followers become too numerous for the allotted space, a new 'suburban' *Akhara* is created with its own space and flag. The *Akharas* themselves are also arranged within the sector according to their prominence, with *Juna Akhara*, the biggest and oldest of the sects, occupying a privileged spot while next to it were the *Mahanirvani* and *Niranjan*. Some of the most interesting and complex spatial textures of the *Kumbh Mela* are found walking across these religious orders. It is interesting to see that while virtually everything changes from one version of the *Kumbh* to the next, the spatial configuration of the *Akhara* remains the same, keeping the same structures and strictly preserving spatial relationships and internal configurations. Continuing with Sennett's ideas, the *Kumbh* could be a refined example of his argument that, "growth in an open city is a matter of evolution, rather than erasure."

At the *Kumbh Mela* openness manifests at different scales and stages from the scale of the constructive detail to the scale of the master plan, as well as from the planning to the deconstruction stage. However, perhaps the most powerful moment in which openness gets expressed in the deployment of the city is when one recognizes that such a mega operation receives its robustness and resilience exactly from being conceived as an open work, as text that is written in dialogue with users complementing the pragmatism of the officials with the appropriation of devotes, *kalpavasis* and saints. Such a fluid openness is based in an implicit contract of confidence, glued by common religious purpose. Again, in Sennett's words the ephemeral city of the *Kumbh*, unlike the closed city, is resilient exactly because it "is a bottom-up place; it belongs to the people." Challenging, current trends and as an extreme case of design and planning with uncertainty, the *Kumbh Mela* shows us how improvisation and incompleteness can become fundamental parts in the construction of strength.

Scaling down, openness also manifests in how the city gets materialized. The power of constructive methods implemented is actually an extreme generic solution, which is always open to combinations. For instance, the modularity of steel plates that can be carried by four men is what allows them to

be deployed anywhere a road is required. The simplicity of hand-stitched cotton tents stretched over lightweight bamboo frames enables them to be concatenated into the skeleton of a megacity, whatever shape it may need to take, and in whatever colors and patterns may be desired. Heavy machinery and advanced technology are, for the most part, not required, nor are highly trained specialists. Highly heterogeneous structures are organized around combinatory systems that rely on few building strategies. The construction techniques occupied grant the designs greater degrees of flexibility. The strength comes from the capacity of achieving specific and determinate forms with a couple of indeterminate solutions applicable in different contexts and that are re-adjustable at any moment. Therefore, the material used for erecting tents, gathering spaces and even monuments that have several meters of height can be afterwards reused in other constructions. Each of the few building techniques implemented at the *Kumbh* are based on the repetition and recombination of a basic module with a simple connection. All of them are constructed out of the same elements: bamboo sticks used as framework to laminar materials, such as corrugated metal sheets or fabric.

The simplicity of the building systems not only shows the attributes to the assembly, reconfiguration and disassembly on site, but

also facilitates the logistics and channels of distribution for each component and piece. The modulation of every material is provided in a way that it can be carried and handled by one person or groups of small people in absence of heavy machinery. Materials are small and light enough to be easily transported and distributed to every corner of the *nagri* in a rapid and efficient manner facilitating construction and reconstruction, as well as formation and reabsorption into the various ecologies and geographies of the region. Therefore, it is a strategy that serves not only the *Kumbh Mela*, but also the whole regional economy, because after the festival ends, the city is dismantled and its components are quickly and effectively recycled or repurposed, with metal and plastic items finding their ways either to storage or to other festivals and construction projects. Biodegradable materials, such as thatch and bamboo are left to reintegrate with the site, which nurtured by the floodwaters, serves as valuable agricultural land for the eleven monsoon cycles between festivals. This open condition of planning, urban design, space occupation and constructability could also be applied to other non-permanent settlements such as refugee camps or disaster relief efforts, as well as to future urban design and redesign projects.

While, recently we have witnessed

some anxiety about finding new forms to incorporate the unspecific as part of the tendency in architectonic projects to embrace randomness, incompleteness, and incrementalism as a design strategy, at the urban scale this operation could be more developed. The aspiration of almost absolute control, brought by the empowerment of new technologies, has started to be challenged by some practical and conceptual efforts that have placed incompletion and incrementalism as more effective strategies for dealing with the natural entropy that exists outside the certainties of the digital world. Therefore, in the same way that we have learned from experiences of incremental social housing at the scale of the city of the *Kumbh Mela,* we could certainly extract some applicable lessons in openness that could work in more permanent cities at the urban scale.

Looking at these two dimensions of the *Kumbh* and thinking about how we can learn from this occurrence, one could suggest that it is time for urbanism, and design more generally, to find new ways for effectively factoring in temporalities as a critical component of its institutional and technological repertoire. For engaging in this discussion the exploration of temporal landscapes opens a potent avenue to explore through research by questioning permanence as a univocal solution for

urban conditions. Instead, one could argue that the future of the cities depends less on the rearrangement of buildings and infrastructure, but more in the ability for us to imagine material, technological, social, and economic landscapes in a more reversible and open way. That is to say, we should perhaps design cities (or at least parts of cities) as holding strategies, which grow out of a close alignment of the temporal scale and solutions we conceptualize in our urban imaginary.

The form of urbanism that emerges after the construction and occupancy of the Kumbh provides what John Kaliski[7] describes as missing in the temporal dimension of contemporary permanent cities – they incorporate elements that remain elusive: ephemerality, cacophony, multiplicity, and simultaneity. The *Kumbh Mela* offers a flexible model of spatial construction that is temporal, cyclic, in constant advancement, ready to spring into motion as the environment changes and to make way for the needs of pilgrims. As we have seen, the *Kumbh's* design anticipates elasticity, building robustness through the capacity to articulate diametrically opposed indices of population, velocities, and concentrations, which it does without having to erase the spatial manifestations of the religious practice or restrict them. The city is constantly designed to frame the human

experience, making its religious component a core determinant of its form.

An inspiring thought that comes after having examined the construction and disassembly of the city is perhaps that design must incorporate the anticipation of diverse temporalities into its imaginary. In single buildings as it is in master plans, the embracing of change as an active dimension in spatial production is something that architects and planners need consider in their processes and outcomes. Change is everywhere and the intellectual wealth that one can gain from the close analysis of this case relies on understanding that every city constantly goes through processes of internal reformulation and is constantly in the process of disassembly. Whether perceptibly or imperceptibly, different materials fade at different paces and geographies change at different speeds. The modulation of change through design processes allows for the production of flexible, elastic, and weak structures at any and all scales. Therefore, something, we can learn from this city is that for an urbanism that recognizes and deals better with the ephemeral nature of the built environment a more intelligent management of change is an essential element. In this case, several layers of changes were managed and negotiated, whether they be flooding, inconsistent human flows during religious celebrations, or the afterlife of

materials involved in sacred death rites. It should inspire more flexible designs for cities, which, like rivers, are shifting.

Besides the technical refinement that has already been highlighted through this study, one should also have a glimpse of how the *Kumbh* experience is actually lived and perceived from within. So, while we were with the group on the rooftop of our camp on a hilltop with a great view of the *Kumbh*, a short but powerful observation by one member crystalized the spirit behind all the spectacular deployment we found. From afar it was impossible to guess that the city was, in fact, ephemeral, a prowess of planning, engineering, and construction raised in a couple of months, but soon to be just as quickly disassembled. We were silently observing and thinking how best to map and understand this ephemeral city, completely focused on understanding tents, streets, infrastructure; impressed with the fluidity that the most elementary components of the everyday city could acquire. Then someone put a question to the owner of the camp, a *sadhvi* or woman priest: "So... the whole plain in which the city is constructed is actually flooded by the river? Are the banks inaccessible during the monsoon?" "No", she responded sharply. "Once a year, the mother Ganga retreats and lets you sit on her lap." A powerful lesson in imagining detachment.

Endnotes:

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