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## An Everyday Park Overwrites a Painful Past

PECHA KUCHA PAPER

Suvarna Apte<sup>1</sup>, Nupur Prothi Khanna<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Design Institute

<sup>2</sup> Beyond Built

aptedalvie@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates that strategic open space planning may offer the way forward to resolve conflicting uses of Jallianwala Bagh, a historic park that witnessed a massacre in April of 1919. Located adjacent (500m) to the holiest shrine of the Sikh religion, the Golden temple, this park that memorializes a tragedy and was an important inflection point in India's independence movement, is presently used for recreational purposes and provides respite to tourists in a densely built walled city of Amritsar in India. The collective memory of a nation is in conflict with everyday social needs of the inner city of Amritsar.

## INTRODUCTION

A cold blood ambush that killed 579 men, women and children stunned the Indians, catapulted an unassuming park called Jallianwala Bagh to embody the birth of a national consciousness against colonial oppression. It is believed to have sparked the coalescence of a fragmented independence movement in what was then an undivided India and a British colony, galvanizing Indians to push ever harder for independence that was finally achieved 28 years later in August of 1947.

Through a century of political upheavals, both planned and informal urban development in the historic core, its painful history is being erased

through a programmatic shift associated with religious tourism driven by the Golden Temple. Our paper investigates the particular predicament of this historic open space hemmed in by a bursting inner city (631persons/ha as opposed to London core at 223persons/ha) that has very few open spaces given the density. We believe that while the national narrative of our collective history is losing its meaning in part due to the design and management of the park, the solution lies beyond the redesign of the park in strategic open space planning. We ask how we can balance respite and recreational needs with a heritage of national significance in the dense walled city which hosts millions of tourists every year. First, we trace the evolution of old Amritsar's (cultural) landscape to unpack layers of history. We then propose an open space strategy that balances interpretation of heritage value of a site of conflict with the genuine need for community open space.

### Jallianwala Bagh in Context

The holy city of Amritsar has occupied a unique place in the historical annals of India since its conception and establishment in 1577. It emerged as a religious centre for Sikhs when their religious leader, Guru Ramdas chose the location for development of a body of holy water (Amrit Sarovar) and temple Hari Mandir, now called Harmandir Sahib or the Golden Temple. The city around was eventually renamed Amritsar. With over 150,000 pilgrims/tourists every day and reaching 600,000 during special festivals, the Golden Temple is one of the emblems of religious tourism in India today. At the height of its glory, the city was 3.4 square kilometers of which two thirds were densely populated katras, the rest were dhabs (ponds) and baghs (gardens). Gardens closest to the temple were part of private estates called bungas, which belonged to chieftains visiting from Lahore (50









Figure 3: Amritsar 2017 (showing walled city with tremendously reduced open spaces), Fig3\_Amritsar2017.jpg, 2017 Google map showing.



Image 1: Memorial ground used for midday break, Img1\_Memorial Foreground.jpg, Source: Authors

1998, Sahni 2003).

### Collective Memory, Design and Urban Development

While many of the other parks and gardens have been lost in the name of urbanization but particularly to cater to the influx of migrants during the partition of India in 1947, we can attribute the massacre of 1919 to the survival of this open space in the centre of the historic city. (Purewal 2000) Today this 6-acre area within the walls looks like a quintessential neighborhood park with hedge lined walkways, trees that give shelter for midday lunches or naps. Two covered walkways give relief from the sun and the space functions as a temporary campsite for several groups of people visiting the Golden Temple and the city. The bulky central stone memorial is a 45-foot shikhara (literally a temple peak) set within a park like setting. It has been peacefully absorbed in the scenery as children jump in and out of empty reflection ponds and visitors take we-were-here selfies leaning against the memorial. Ubiquitous lawn and ornamental planting in soil or in pots makes light of the sheer callous savagery experienced in the enclosure by making the park a

pleasant place. Even the well in which people jumped to their deaths trying to avoid bullets, fails to convey a sense of horror, having been enclosed by an oddly decorated pink building. The carefully preserved bullet-ridden walls are the only scars that truly give visitors a sense of its gory history.

The design and state of the park brings up questions of balancing public leisure space with the gravitas needed to memorialize the tragedy and marking a turning point within the quest for self rule among Indians for future generations. The overlap of use by pilgrims due to the proximity of the Golden Temple and use by locals as a neighborhood park has left Jallianwala Bagh unsure of what it really should be. Together, they present us with a dilemma of how to maintain the message and significance of historical events that have been so transformative for the nation while addressing need for open public spaces in the city today.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We deploy Lefebvre's triadic approach of perceived, conceived and lived spaces to create a framework and develop a strategy of open spaces for the walled city of Amritsar since it engages with not only social diversity but also with symbolic nature of space and the built environment. We open our investigation into the negotiated dialectic between the three as it unfolds





Image 2: Bullet ridden walls provide solemnity, *img2\_Preserved Bullet marked Walls.jpg*, Source: Authors

everyday. As we face the commodification of urban spaces along Dharam Singh Market, Jallianwala Bagh confronts immense pressure to not only participate in bite-sized nationalist tourism but also as an everyday space. The representation of space- conceived, by architect Benjamin Polk is a concoction of empty Indian symbolism that unfortunately does not capture the collective identity that emerged as an outcome of this tragedy. This approach guides us to delve into the social practices (perceived, the way a space is used) and both, historical and current symbolic value (lived) for the production of space around the Golden Temple. Similar to UNESCO's Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach, we ask how a city defines its heritage values and assesses the vulnerability of its past to the imminent pressures of urbanization.

### Open space strategy

We believe that the inappropriate use of the Jallianwala Bagh can be addressed if we put in place a holistic vision and an open space strategy for acknowledging, reassessing and (re) connecting the assortment of gardens, courtyards, tanks, street junctions, setbacks etc. to address the needs of the visitors, residents and other communities of interest within the walled city. The values of freedom, justice and patriotism through which emerged the idea of an Indian nation,

are still relevant in the aspiration for a democratic nation which can be addressed in the repositioning of the inner city landscape. We are suggesting use of a simple four stage process of first prepare (the brief, scope of strategy, select partners, secure funding), then review the context, understand the supply, understand demand and need, analyse and identify objectives, prepare the strategy and action plan.

We have found that there are open spaces available close to the Golden Temple- these are also historic parks and need sensitive treatment but are not sites in conflict with everyday use. However, they are not as visible, well known or directly accessible as Jallianwala Bagh. The exercise of preparing a strategy begins with identification of open spaces in the old city such as Galiara and south of Langer hall, Chowk Karori, Bagh Ramanand, all have the potential to absorb tourists and are underused currently. We propose a study of their historic value as well their social, economic and environmental value from the perspective of connectivity to known popular points of origin and destinations of users. It would help the city to develop a connectivity strategy (example an interpretive directions and signage) to negotiate the inner city landscape to travel to and from the Golden Temple.

### Way forward

What we are proposing cannot be accomplished without explicit involvement of the city stakeholders such as the SGPC, the Golden Temple management, the Jallianwala Bagh Memorial Trust, state and local officials and most importantly city's residents who undoubtedly have a conflicted relationship with massive volumes of tourists. To ensure future pride and stewardship of the historical spaces, city of Amritsar needs a dialogue of what values are being projected through its open space to create a balance between underused and overused open spaces.

Any proposed use would need to safeguard the multi use and multi-cultural nature of spaces in historic cities while suggesting concrete measures to streamline their kind, time and nature of use (CABE space document, 2009). The city needs its stakeholders to look beyond its narrowly defined agendas to remember why we are together as a nation in the first place. In an effort to retain its value for the entire nation, it cannot afford to let Jallianwala Bagh, a park of national importance be diminished to become a neighbourhood park.

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