Camping in a Mud House: Ruins and Fragments as Tropes of Reflexivity

Abstract: This paper contextualizes three iterations of contemporary art practice performed in Delhi, September 2014, and explores the notion that artistic activity occurs first of all in the field of distribution. In this paper I speculate on the insistence of a procedure that uncovers the spaces of potential and allows new voices to emerge through a dispersed practice. These new works are part of a broader practice where I am trying to highlight the creative potential of the fragment to restore an embodied relationship to the world. These new works are a direct result of my speculative proposal included in the exhibition curated by Raqs Media Collective as part of INSERT2014 titled 'New Models on Common Ground' held at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi, February 2014. The paper explores creative work that attempts, as Marcel Duchamp once put it, to be not of art, but outside the usual parameters of art and which sidesteps or at least delays being co-opted by the institutions that define art as 'art' and that have traditionally distributed it.

Keywords: Artistic Research, Creative Practice

This paper contextualizes three iterations of practice performed in New Delhi, September 2014. In my creative practice I contemplate the notion of fragmentation as a trope of reflexivity. In this paper I speculate on the insistence of a procedure that uncovers the spaces of potential and allows them voice through a dispersed practice. These new works are part of a broader practice where I am trying to highlight the creative potential of the fragment to restore an embodied relationship to the world. In my practice as an artist I use photography, found and made objects, video, sound, neon, fabric and construction materials often associated with set or stage design or temporary buildings. There is a performative aspect to my work as an artist - to open up art as a practice, as a process - as a *social space.*

Often working in neglected urban spaces, the creative energy found in such settings offers a useful metaphor for our state of being. Working with fragments and ruins provide the marginal spaces I need for dispersing ideas – ones that do not stand for anything certain but that are renegotiating a relationship with audience; testing out work that perhaps is not "of art". According to Daniel Kunitz (2011) the lesson of the earlier efforts in 1960s where art challenged context, is that if you want to disrupt the understanding of what art is you need to alter how it gets to its audience. He quoted the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers who wrote: "The definition of artistic activity occurs, first of all, in the field of distribution" (Crow, 1996 p.177).

That sentence serves as the epigraph to Seth Price's *Dispersion*, in which he imagines a way to escape institutions, he wrote:

> "Suppose an artist were to release the work directly into a system that
> depends on reproduction and distribution for its sustenance, a model
> that encourages contamination, borrowing, stealing, and horizontal
> blur. The art system usually corrals errant works, but how could it
> recoup thousands of freely circulating paperbacks?" (Price, 2002 p.7).

In other words, if you want to free yourself from what some have said are the strangulating forces of the market-driven establishment, then perhaps artists should try unleashing some kind of 'artistic scheme' against the system by flooding it with confusing work (Price and Hamilton, 2012).

The intention to problematize and to re-introduce complexity into the system is clear, like Marcel Broodthaers before him, Price imagines a way for art to escape institutions. This paper speaks to one such project in which I *enact* works that are, as Duchamp once put it, not "of art" — but outside the usual parameters of art which side-step or at least delay being co-opted by the institutions that define art as 'art' and that have traditionally distributed it.

For many years now I have been working with the fragment, occupying the space of the ruin, trying to realize what I have always felt to be its creative potential – sometimes it has worked and sometimes it has failed. I realized from the start the idea of failure and working intuitively with fragments within in a world of fragments would become an important feature of my practice (see figure 1). This is an example from an early work that *worked* – it was made on the spot in a row of derelict terraced houses just outside Manchester, England in 1983 and the reason it worked I came to realize, but in a sense always knew, was because over many days the fragments were allowed to speak for themselves over the period of time I was *in situ*. This period of time I refer to, or delayed closure, is as long (or short) as it needs to be and is led by the need for a *found problem* to emerge as part of the creative outcome (Getzels, J. W. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. 1976). As Donald Schön wrote, an 'appreciative system' develops through a reflective conversation between the situation and those within it (Schön, 1983).

For the visual language to *become* I needed to work with the fragment over time in order for the piece to grow to be what it needed to be rather than what I wanted it to become. To be close to it, to occupy its space, I needed to 'camp' out with it in the shelter of that row of derelict houses: doing/undoing and the potential of failure were accepted as procedural components of the practice of discovery and of the reflexive conversation between artist, place and material. Significantly, failings were in some way closely synonymous with that elusive space of potential not "of art" as they revealed to me the gap or break I was searching for in the production line of art's commodification.

In the autumn of 2013 there was an open call for speculations from artists, curators, writers, architects, cultural practitioners and activists for the re-imagination of spaces and cultural infrastructure in Delhi. Raqs Media Collective, the Delhi-based artistic and curatorial collective, invited proposals for the imaginative rethinking of unused public spaces and cultural infrastructure in Delhi. The call was a provocation for artists and cultural practitioners to rediscover the city's cultural and artistic potential through imaginative transformations and the result was a series of conversations initiated by artists from all over the world congregating in Delhi.

My project *'A Place of Impossibility'* was among the 25 successful submissions invited to exhibit their full proposals in the exhibition in *New Models for Common Ground* at Mati Ghar (Mud House), at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) February 2014 as part of *INSERT2014*.[1]

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[1] 25 selected proposals featured as one of the axes of INSERT2014, at Mati Ghar, IGNCA, and were also part of the INSERT2014 publication. They were by: Akansha Rastogi; Akshata Naik + Barnet Alex; Varghese + Jithinlal + Teja Gavankar + Venkataraman Divakar + Vibin George; Alec Shepley; Anagram Architects; Aryakrishnan Ramakrishnan + Karthik KG; Atom Collective; Chandni Arun Narendra; CRIT Studio; Heidi Fichtner; Hemavathy Guha; Himali Singh Soin;

INSERT2014 was an international contemporary art exhibition curated by Raqs Media Collective; it was presented by the INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation, and supported by the Goethe Institute, New Delhi, and also by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore. The trigger for the series was an invitation that Raqs received from INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation. At that time, they had just inaugurated the *Sarai Reader '09*, a nine-month-long exhibition organised in collaboration with the Devi Art Foundation that dealt with what the future art scene in Delhi could be.

According to Monica Narula, a member of the Raqs Media Collective, they selected Delhi as the site for Insert 2014 for both conceptual and logistical reasons. Delhi is where the collective was founded in 1992 and has been based ever since. Earlier, Raqs had co-founded the Sarai programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, where they led interdisciplinary research and discussions between artists and researchers for more than a decade.

For Azad Shivdasani, chairman of INLAKS Shivdasani Foundation and the sponsor for this event, the idea was to see how an international show of contemporary art would fare in Delhi, after he came across one in Los Angeles. The main concern for Shivdasani, however, was that the event should be socially relevant. This is reflected in the kind of artists who were invited to be a part of it, such as the Taiwanese artist Yao Jui-Chung, from Taipei who presented *Energies of Derelict Buildings* as part of *INSERT2014* and has for the last two decades been fascinated by abandoned buildings, and those that have been built but never used (Ali, 2014). Referring to one such recent work at Meliwan Resort on Shanyuan Bay, Taitung County where construction work started on the project in 2004, then ceased in 2007, and finally resumed in 2011, Yao said:

> "Derelict buildings can naturally make for a good metaphor, a symbol for a certain state of mind, as our circumstances and our background can be seen in a similar way – as derelict buildings pending redevelopment or reconstruction. Derelict buildings provide a kind of creative energy that can be harnessed by artists" (Yao, 2011).

My own project in *New Models for Common Ground* as part of *INSERT2014* speculated on the reimagining of two sites selected from the list put forward by Raqs Media Collective, namely Palika Bazaar, Palika Park, and the abandoned office building know locally as Skipper Tower in Delhi. Speculative street encounters, walks or happenings were proposed as a way of the artist directly experiencing the selected sites, encountering those people who lived and worked there and documenting the process using photography and video. Skipper Tower, located outside the metro station of Barakhambha Road, is a disputed property has come to symbolize for many, the image of modernity in the form of a 'ruin from the future'. This empty tower block currently stands alone and silent amongst many busy office spaces. The possession of this fourteen floor abandoned building currently rests under the Claims Commissioner, by the order of the Supreme Court of India.

Indrani Baruah; Janine Ramlochan; kOSh; Layout Collective; Manuela Ciotti; Naresh Kumar; Naveen Mahantesh; Paribartana Mohanty; Parul Gupta + Gagandeep Singh; Samarjeet Behera; Solomon Benjamin; Sikan Kumar Panda; Surajit Sarkar; Vinay Seth

Although there was no further information found about this building at the time of writing this paper, the site in its present state of ruins and abandonment was seen by the project curators Raqs, as definitely one that could fuel micro engagements, as major events might be problematic due to the restrictions over ownership.

The second site chosen for the project was Palika Bazaar Park on Connaught Place, Delhi. This park (and if you include the underground market) is one of the most popular public places of Delhi. This park attracts people from all walks of life: from homeless vagabonds to office workers, from college students to compulsive loners and many others besides. Connaught Place, popularly knows as CP is known not only for its nostalgic historicity and impressive built heritage, but also for the sheer vitality of changing urban life with all its fullness and diversity. I was particularly interested in the contrasting effects of a large, modern office block void of people, the popular park busy with people from all walks of life and how possibilities for micro-engagements, which included local people and groups of tourists milling around in the mix.

Some initial internet research revealed that prior to construction, 'the area was a ridge, covered with trees and wild animals such as jackals and wild pigs…[] villages like *Madhoganj*, *Jaisingh Pura* and *Raja ka Bazaar* were evicted to clear the area for the construction of Connaught Place and the development of its nearby areas. The villages were once situated along the historic Qutb Road, the main road connecting Shahjahanabad, the walled city of Delhi (now known as Old Delhi) to Qutb Minar in south Delhi since the Mughal era. They were relocated in Karol Bagh to the West, a rocky area populated only by trees and wild bushes. However, three structures were spared demolition.

These were Hanuman temple, a Jain temple in Jaisinghpura and the Jantar Mantar. Named after Prince Arthus, the 1st Duke of Connaught and third son of Queen Victoria, Connaught Place was developed in the 1920's and 1930's as the showpiece of Edwin Lutyens' Delhi and this ordered scheme imposed Georgian architecture modeled after the Royal Crescent, Bath'. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connaught_Place,_New_Delhi).

However, over recent times and despite the numbers of people present at any given time of the day (estimated to be c.25000) the area is in decline and described to be in a state of decay. So as part of a wider effort, the New Delhi Municipal Council is currently working on plans for a major "regeneration of Palika Bazaar". According to *The Times of India* (December 2006) "with the 2010 Commonwealth Games in mind, the New Delhi Municipal Council (NMDC) is gearing up to give Palika Bazar [...] which is currently in a state of decay, a makeover." According to Shuddha Sengupta of Raqs "we said to ourselves that instead of thinking of Delhi as a city with hardly any place for art, what if we were to invert this statement. What happens if we think of all the dormant sites that can be used for artistic activity?" (http://www.insert2014.in)

The project that I proposed for these sites was situated therefore within a broader context of nomadic and fragmented contemporary artistic practices, with an aim to invert them as spaces seemingly void of artistic activity and, by including myself with an encountered audience to both subvert and affect rhetorical frameworks and

structures, reimagine these spaces – or at least their potential to be re-imagined through artistic engagement. This is important, as the idea behind *Insert2014*, according to Sengupta is that of seeing the artist "as a generator of ideas, not as an illustrator" who "through his/her curiosity is able to pull together questions that otherwise would not have been asked" (ibid). The point of departure for this event, therefore, is not the artwork but the artist. However, given the history and context of the location, its current condition and the potential for my status as an artist to be perceived as an unwanted intrusion i.e. being 'parachuted' in to an area to engage in some kind of development activity, I decided to adopt 'a point of departure' as my main focus of activity and to introduce into a public setting for the first time a studio procedure I have been practicing for many years – that of sweeping the floor.

Through the series of performed (planned and un-planned) encounters with users and visitors of the proposed sites in Delhi, my proposal was to observe current conditions, exploring and documenting any apparent dilapidations and deteriorating institutional frameworks. The intention was "to invert the notion of ruin and reveal its positive and creative potential [to] pave the way for renewal and change" (Shepley, 2014). Through enacting this process of street cleaning I would be able to encounter physical manifestations of the incomplete, unfinished maintenance and failings in the institutional fabric and form a visual language remarking on the present *condition*.

Using a research grant awarded for the project, I travelled to Delhi in September 2014 and over a period of several days enacted three street cleaning *dérives* at three co-located sites in New Delhi: Palika Park; Skipper Tower; and Connaught Place (see figures 2-5).

In *Enactments #1, #2 and #3* (Figures 6, 7 & 8) I am engaged in the act of sweeping the selected sites Connaught, Palika Park and Skipper Tower. At first glance these may seem like pointless acts, however I am exploring what Gordon Matta-Clarke has referred to as metaphoric voids, gaps, left-over spaces, undeveloped spaces where where you stop to tie your shoelaces. In other words, these are the places that are just interruptions in your own daily movements (1975, pp.130-35).

Enactments #1, #2 and #3 were acts of contouring where I walked the contours of these evocative cultural sites, following the psycho-geographic lines and shapes in my path, sensually sweeping the brush along the grooves, gutters and pavements of the selected sites.

In taking 'a line for a walk' (or in this case a brush) I am drawing an analogy with painting - but in this scenario the street is the canvas and other than the documentation, there is no representation - only the immediate experience and shared witnessing experience of the live act. It is an example of doing and undoing and this interplay becomes the maxim of the process. Given the reaction of the people I encountered in taking my practice to the street, this situated work served as a temporary sign transmitting a joyous presence in and amongst the proposed sites. It also meant encountering new audiences and creating art not about art but to empower the viewer to apply an aesthetic of regular experience to other encounters in a wider field of action – a key aim of my creative work.

This project focuses on architecture and site as metaphors for our own mental states, confronting the viewer with fragmentation and an incomplete project that perhaps is within our nature to shy away from. In this new work however, an attempt was made to put into reverse the negative stereotypes of the neglect - to invert it and create the potential for a more positive metaphor by *cleaning*. The viewer is immersed in a set of visual relationships that subconsciously he or she is aware of, to create allegories, new meanings and to foreground the creative potential of the fragment in a process of renewal and redefinition.

This work is influenced by Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities,* and in particular the sections about the cities of Leonia and Sophronia. The accidental viewer on the street of Delhi would witness a figure steadily and progressively sweeping his way around a district attempting to fulfill a seemingly impossible blueprint referred to by the inhabitants of *Invisible Cities*. The visual narrative conjures the street cleaners who are welcomed like angels to the city, and who 'engage in their task of removing the residue of yesterday's existence in a respectfully silent ritual that inspires devotion'. This is perhaps because once things have been discarded nobody really wants to have to think about them anymore:

> "Nobody wonders where, each day, they carry their load of refuse.
> Outside the city, surely; but each year the city expands, and the street
> cleaners have to fall farther back. The bulk of the outflow increases and
> the piles rise higher, become stratified, extend over a wider perimeter.
> Besides, the more Leonia's talent for making new materials excels, the
> more the rubbish improves in quality, resists time, the elements,
> fermentations, combustions. A fortress of indestructible leftovers
> surrounds Leonia, dominating it on every side, like a chain of
> mountains" (Calvino, 1974).

In the book, as in this project, the reader/viewer is compelled to reflect on the ultimate outcomes of such accumulations of debris as an outcome of daily progress and thus question a wider logic around production and unbridled modernity. This question about what to do with our worldly possessions, once we no longer have a use for them, is as poignant today as it ever was and my *Enactments #1, 2 & 3* pause, visualize and reflect on the status of the fragment within a potentially restored embodied relationship with the world.

For me as an artist I felt I had created precisely the kind of dispersed encampment around the 'place of possibility' referred to by Michael Phillipson when he wrote:

> "Under the intensity of creative experimentation (the situation and
> challenge of artists' practice) each work asks itself (and therefore us,
> too) whether there might be a 'place' where culture has not yet
> reached; it hopes to be that 'place' – an elsewhere that is not yet a
> 'place' on culture's terms" (Phillipson, 1995).

Palika Park and Skipper Tower have such a strong resonance with me (even more so now having 'touched' them) as they are spaces that were once part of a Utopian master plan -institutionally cared for but perhaps now more feral spaces, slipping through the now worn municipal order and re-occupied by chance.

The projects within *INSERT2014* inhabit these 'places' – the 'elsewhere', referred to by Phillipson, moving beyond being 'places' on culture's terms" (ibid) - in other words, outside our normal parameters of understanding culture.

The project is ongoing as there is a further iteration of practice planned for 2016, this time as a solo exhibition in Delhi, referencing the place of fragments and removals from the sites, exploring notions of entropy and places of dis-assembly.

The project aims to rethink expectations about the artwork, opening up the space to problematise assumptions of what may constitute a work of art or in other words an unsitely aesthetic (Miranda, 2013, p310).

Jeebesh Bagchi, the third member of the Raqs Media Collective, said that *INSERT2014* was concerned with what ought to become normal practice looking at "the way that an artist interacts with the world." In other words, the project was a way to open up the "possibility of a more democratic art with the [internet acting as] public space for artists to encounter and even call forth new publics" (http://www.insert2014.in).

By exploring the psycho-geography of the area: the desired 'seamlessness' of a city's self image, I was able to observe actual seams opening up or failings in the infrastructure, use/non-use/ misuse but without the often obligatory practice of documentary photography. I was able to occupy the spaces relatively unburdened by the need to make or produce an outcome other than the practice of being there. I was able to *unmake* – an act I found particularly liberating.

In the words of Michel De Certeau I was able to link "acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions" emptying them out of their primary role and historical order of movement, as a means of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning (1984, p.105).

Paradoxically, and as perhaps a cautionary endnote to myself if no other, in resisting or circumventing the problem of the art object's commodification Miwon Kwon argues that it is now the performative aspect of the artist's mode of operation that is circulated as an art commodity – artists have adopted managerial functions of art institutions (Kwon, M 2000, pp.38-63) in an "aesthetics of administration" (Buchloh, 1991 p.105-43). Nevertheless Kwon argues, despite a proliferation of 'artist / nomad / aesthetic administrator' and the loosening of relations around exhibition and reception the phantom of a site as an actual place remains – perhaps as a "compensatory fantasy in response to the intensification and alienation wrought by a mobilized market economy following the dictates of capital" (Kwon, M 2000 p.57).

Through an insinuation into the visual language of these places, I was able to explore what Kwon has referred to as a place where our fictional selves could be in the space of *unmaking* and retrieve for myself some form of ownership and control for the idea of an art that is not 'of art' - a form of occupation as a performative process (Shepley, 2014). In this ongoing artistic research project I am enacting, documenting and reflecting on improvised sites in various urban settings to explore the sense of *hovering*. I bring a kind of nomadic studio and hover in a state of unresolved poetics,

ambivalence, mutability and itinerancy. These enactments are dialectically linked replies to one another, and are a means of creating a transactional creative practice which is questioning the commodification of art - or at least delaying its approach. Detailing viewer engagement and empowerment is the subject of further research.
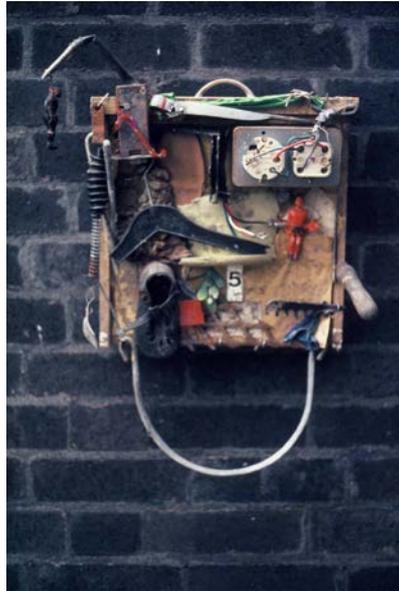
Illustrations

Figure 1. Alec Shepley 1983 *(Untitled) Assemblage*, Various Materials
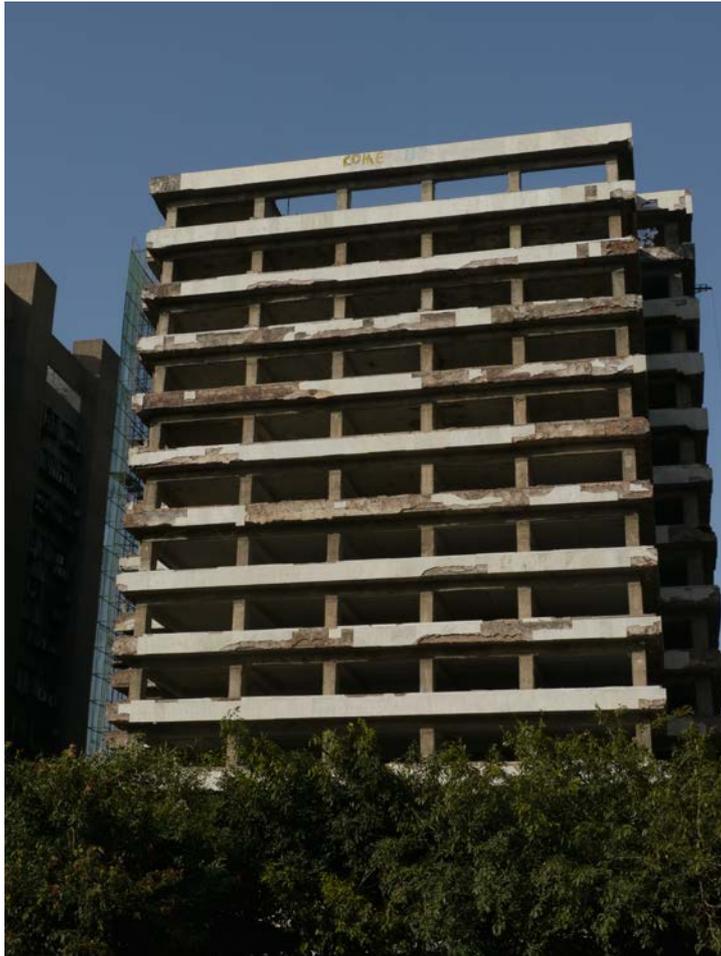

Figure 2. Palika Park, New Delhi (Image courtesy of INSERT2014)

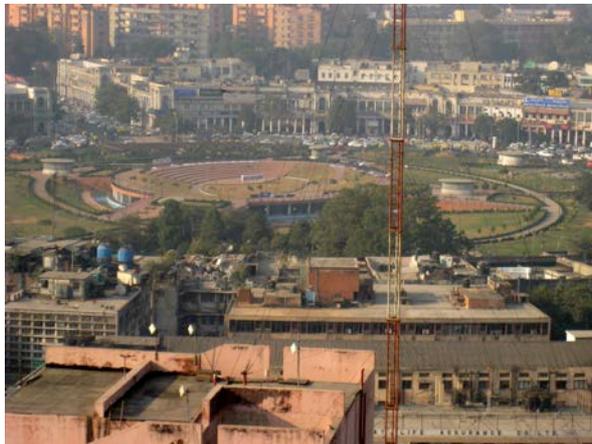Figure 3. Skipper Tower, New Delhi

Figure 4. Connaught Place, New Delhi
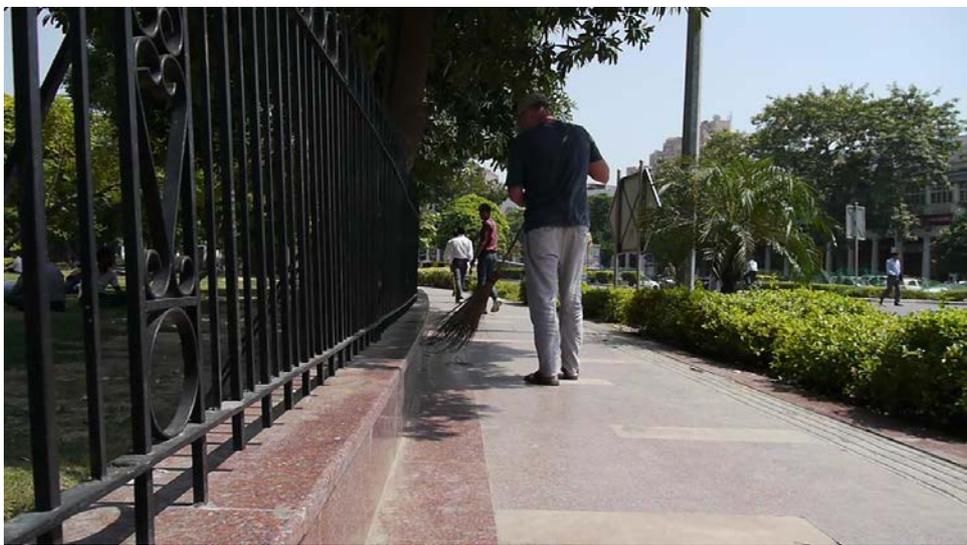
Figure 5. Connaught Place, New Delhi

Figure 6. Alec Shepley 2014 *Enactment #1* Connaught Place, New Delhi

Figure 7. Alec Shepley 2014 *Enactment #2* Skipper Tower, New Delhi

Figure 8. Alec Shepley 2014 *Enactment #3* Palika Park, New Delhi

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