Ornament and Crime

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Security and safety are treated by design practitioners as physical issues. The role of design as the problem solver, in smart and aesthetic ways, needs to be expanded to be more of an intellectual activity, an activity that involves thinking as its function. This essay focuses on what security and safety mean for a city, laying out certain questions that 'design' will need to think about.

The essay borrows its title from Adolf Loos' essay, however it does not claim to make any particular references to it here. However it would try and indicate visually how the decorative property of ornaments is an essential ingredient of crime prevention objects designed within architecture and for the city; while we narrate in the text stories of urban sin and fear. On another hand one could also look at security and crime as the new ornaments of the contemporary metropolis – the ornaments are designed or planned paradise versus a disordered chaos seething in hidden but imagined geographies.

As the architectural theorist Akos Moravanszky noted "imaginary places are invested with strong identities", cities today that are falling into further and further ambiguous renditions, need stronger handles to understand or comprehend the chaos that apparently surrounds them. The chaos and ambiguity of a space, like a metropolis, gets more and more exposed to its citizen who believed in the planned order and reality of the neighbourhood and city s/he lived in. In such a situation, that chaos and ambiguity has to be brought to order. The modern city dweller cannot accept that the city or his building is no haven of sanity despite the architect and planner's claim and struggle, and professional belief. Obviously the concern for order, is more psychological than social, however it is projected to be social. The city as the site for a dream life, of job, of progress and a happy family, so often projected as the obvious to be expected, actually has to be continuously protected and struggled for. Physical or financial, securities and safety are continuously projected as the need of the hour, the motifs of 'fine life'!

The home is attacked! You get an insurance policy. You get Domestos, or any other such phenol, mosquito repellent, germ killing soap, and so on. We are a society of panic and attack-fear. But this is not simple as it sounds, this imagination of the home attacked is only the tip of the ice-berg. 'Fear' seems to be some kind of industrial production today. Mass manufactured! And then there are products, and products, to destroy that fear, or at least you imagine so. From the germs on your hand, to the robber in your neighbourhood, to the rapist on the street, to the terrorist in Taj Mahal Hotel, they are all threatening your dream!! The bracket of classification is getting defined in a particular direction for sure!

1. Urban Object 3 - Gates, with flowers as arrow heads
2. Navigating a city - aspiring for organisation as sanitisation
3. Urban Object 3 - Gates, birds that fly but stop you
4. Urban Object 3 - Gate design

1. Urban Object 2 - demarcating the inside and the outside
2. Urban chaos - apparent lack of clarity
3. Urban chaos - the fear of lack of spatial comprehension - legally and spatially
4. Urban Object 2 - Violence of separation

Cleanliness, or a crime-free neighbourhood, or the integrity of (an imagined) nation, are the ornaments we live by, and prefer to decorate our anxieties of living with.

The essay will do a common knowledge survey of two incidents that rocked the city of Mumbai, both on Marine Drive road. For this one has to accept the status of this road in the imagination of Mumbai. Marine Drive, like Victoria Terminus or now the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus has often been the image of the city. Often Bollywood movies have begun their narratives with a picture-perfect shot of these sites. The glory entry and the fulfilled dream are often contained in these symbolic images. About four years ago, a police constable raped a girl, during the afternoon hours, inside a police booth on Marine Drive. There was a big uproar in the city. Media covered it at an all-India level. The local residents got angry and burnt down the police booth – the site of crime. Well, crime in this city was nothing new. This rape case was not the first of its kind in the city. Police atrocity was nothing new. What was disturbing, and in some ways new, was that there was crime on Marine Drive. Suddenly the life of girls was in danger, because 'this could happen on Marine Drive'. The sanctity of this road, and its plush residences, and its rich residents was disturbed. A logic that always prevails is that crime should have its geographical locale in the city clearly specified. Germs in the gutter on the road, are fine! Germs in my house… never! Hence if any house that has any apparent sign of germs inside it… they are not the pure and perfect homes anymore; its residents are lesser mortals. Similarly, if crime happens in Dongri or Pydhonie, or Antop Hill, geographies that are not common knowledge, but only created through stories of disorder in the press or television, then it is the accepted complexity of a city, where crime happens… but not in 'my' face. So for crime to take place at Marine Drive is like crime in the face of the city! The rhetoric was more about 'crime at Marine Drive' rather than 'rape' per se.

The city's geography is comfortably organised in safe areas and not-so-safe areas, that if there is any threat to this imagined and accepted map, then 'crime' suddenly becomes a threat to life and human sanctity, until then, crime is accepted as a part of life, just like you accept disease as a part of our physical life. One knows, rather one accepts, that crime will exist, but as long as it follows the planner's map of where it should be and where not, it is fine, else it becomes the object of concern. In having geographies of crime and safety defined in the citizen's imagination of space, home and neighbourhood, there is a clear management of crime. Those who can afford, politically and economically, a stamp of safety and security for their homes or neighbourhoods, also prefer to

hold it as a certificate to their holistic 'nice human being' projection. And for this they do not need a complete eradication of crime, because else how will they distinguish 'safe' from the 'unsafe'? They need crime to exist, but elsewhere, so that my 'safe' is a special one.

This struggle is one that happens not just between neighbourhoods in cities, but between nations at a global level. Terrorism is a perfect system invented to dislocate crime. It is a purposeful and organised dislocation. Where, then to keep your home, your nation safe, you can fight wars elsewhere, you can blame crime in the other's home! Without further going into a discussion on terrorism, which is not the central agenda here, one could discuss the question of crime and security as far as the recent terror attacks in Mumbai in November 2008.

One can start with an anecdote here. A person, who was outside Café Leopold where the first shooting happened, immediately ran for safety, and could not think of a place safer than the 5-star Taj Mahal Hotel just a few streets away. Lest did he know he was jumping from the frying pan into the fire… literally! Café Leopold, every Bombay-visiting bag-packing tourists' haunt, every college goer's beer drinking hideout, started functioning on the Monday immediately after the terror weekend. Taj Mahal Hotel for weeks remained cordoned off! These are clear indications of how places and sites are assumed havens of safety or of crime. The shooting at Leopold was immediately reported as 'gang-wars', and for ages now Mumbai has not witnessed any gang-wars, but just the location of this café where every beer drinker is seen as partaking off in some hedonistic revelry and also maybe some 'dirty-business' was obviously not worthy of big talk, but a site for 'gang-war', Mumbai's darker side of crime and gangsters. But if the Taj Hotel was attacked, it was the 'symbol of the city' under attack. Well for the record, it took these very terrorists, to get the building graduated to this status. Before this incident, one never remembers the Taj Hotel ever referred to as the 'symbol of the city', except in its self-made documentary played in its suites and rooms for their own customers! What was shocking for all, and everyone, was that a place that is apparently, and I mean here visually and psychologically, a fortress could be so easily penetrated and attacked. One should remember that only a few months ago, there were allegations that a woman wearing no footwear was not allowed to enter the Hotel although she claimed she had enough money to pay for her purchases at any of the restaurants.

The Taj Mahal or the Oberoi Hotels are also public spaces that are fiefdoms. Many individuals who visit these hotels and their restaurants regularly for meals, or coffee, or wedding receptions, spoke of attacked corners, furniture, and the staff as if it was their home outside home. For Mumbai, and India's 'who's who' it was nearly a private space attacked.

1. *Urban Object 5 - Fence, my window to the world*
2. *Urban Object 4 - security and comfort*
3. *Urban Object - the final ornament - the inside, discrete and to be protected*
4. *Urban Object 5 - Seeing through the fence*

Again here there is the fear that 'their space' which they thought was above this world and politics was the site for some kind of an urban war for 3 days. At one level a hotel is a public space, a city space, but the way it operates it is also a very privatised and 'secured' space, in many, many ways. For the vast masses that probably never entered these monument-sized buildings, secured and sanitised as they are, and which appeared so well guarded from the outside, and could be fairy-tale rich and glamorous probably as a palace from the inside, were now exposed to chaos. The fairy-tale imaginations of these sites of aspiration entry were chaotically unplugged.

Another most interesting aspect of this incident was the way these building spaces were navigated as geographical terrain. The spatial structure of a hotel, with its rooms, corridors, staircases, lifts, along with service stairs, service corridors, kitchens and service entries forms a crazy but very interesting landscape in the context of this incident. The anti-terrorism squad had to continuously be briefed on this terrain, as they had never entered these kinds of spaces before. As an architect one would know that sometimes service spaces in such buildings can be around 25%. The terrorists, by previous training and familiarity with the sites they had planned to attack, completely used this spatial geography to their advantage, very much like a mountain tribesman would use that terrain of rocky outcrops and passes. The complexity of space in these building was the biggest impediment to safety, one could say. The building which is apparent as a one whole object had suddenly become an enclosed terrain. The street outside was safer than the corridors or rooms inside. The street was from where you could view the spectacle, the inside was where the insecure citizens were struggling. The inside was attacked. The hotel which is a home to many who travel so often to foreign cities in these 'world is flat' days, was under siege. The same inside, enclosed within the glamour of architecture on the outside, that assured of a safety from the chaotic outside, was precisely under siege. Its secure self confidence was shattered. In the study of urban wars and crimes, this will be an interesting example of how architecture of a certain nature provided a perfect site for war, while the city outside functioned fairly normally for those 3 days.

From advertisements of burglar alarms, good strong locks and safes, protecting your credit card pins, to insuring your life and home, saving in securities (*that are subject to market risks in fine print or fast read*), to be unsure if the train is safer than a bus after bomb attacks, to seeing a national security drama on television for 3 days, to hoping that my garden is greener than yours, spaces, architecture and cities are nasty design objects. In these design processes are we designing for making a world a better place to live in, or are these booby traps of our own making? Is design thinking? Or is design just providing, like a handmaiden to economic and political structures? Dividing cities into neighbourhoods, either as planners or as users of real estate spaces, most often historical exigencies are deep hidden political agendas. Designing strong and monumental iron gates to tall and fancy-looking buildings that immediately downsize a human being trying to enter it are designed with lush floral creepers and bouquets, but in iron!

We prefer to design objects in a context-less imagination, and worse believe that we are part of the world. The blank paper or screen we design on is contained with historical exigencies, and often our design training has no clue about handling it. We design ornaments – objects that a flourishes, superfluous (*apparently so*), yet accepted in the way the world sees itself, but we forget, that the ornament is the silent container. Whether it is a Police chowki (*booth*) or the Taj Mahal hotel, or the Bandra promenade where couples are prevented from sitting, designing gates and security fences, protecting computers from viruses, it's a bundle of objects we are constantly designing, not knowing why, except for its immediate function and apparent design quality. I would end by extending my earlier question – Is design thinking? To 'What is the designer thinking'?

Urban Object 4 - Every corner

Urban Object 1 - Railings to limits