

# KOLKATA CULTURAL HERITAGE: PAST AND PRESENT SCENARIO

## *Case Study: Khidderpore*

SOURODIP, LAHIRI

Central Public Works Department, Agartala, India  
*sourodip.lahiri@gov.in, sourodip.lahiri@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** The abstract should write like this with one paragraph. It should explain the research context, issues investigated, the methodology used, and findings discussed. The abstract should be without any citation, references and unexplained abbreviations and has not more than 200 words. Cambria 08pt, leading 10 pt. Space before: 30 pt.

**Keywords:** *Tangible cultural heritage, Intangible cultural heritage, built environment, urban space, public realm.*

### 1. Introduction

South Asian cities are growing in size with rapid rate of increase in population and urbanization. Space is becoming contested. Many of the important South Asian cities are quite old. Traditionally these cities were centres of economy, culture, education and employment which attracted people from distant small towns and rural areas. These migrated people formed slums and squatter settlements in the core and fringe areas of the city. Different ethnic and religious groups settled in specific places and often trade was also localized. Anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Basu wrote about Kolkata (historically, Calcutta) (Bose, 1965), "Ethnic groups tend to cluster together in their own quarters. They are distinguished from one another not only by language and culture but also by broad differences in the way they make their living". Slowly the homogenous clusters of communities are becoming part of heterogeneous society. A large city is a melting pot of cultures both tangible and intangible. With economic growth, as the cities become centres of consumption from centres of production, there is conflict between tradition and modernity. With real estate boom, the urban fabric is changing rapidly resulting in the demolition of historic buildings – consuming spaces available for social gatherings. While old spaces for self expression are increasingly converted into lucrative commercial spaces, new spaces are not adequately created. However, Bengalis are still culture-oriented at heart – emotionally linked to Kolkata (Calcutta).

### 2. Historical background

Ever since Kolkata was named the capital of British India in 1772, its city life became the example of "the splendid sloth and languid debauchery of European society", when "great men rode about in State coaches, with a dozen servants running before and behind them to bawl out their titles". The architectural splendor and cultural environment was so overwhelming, that it led Miss Emily Eden (the sister of the then Governor General, who gave her name to Eden Gardens) in 1836 to write about Kolkata:

"Depend upon it, Calcutta is the finest place in the world. I know there are towns with far larger and grander buildings; but then they are not half so clean, and new, and beautiful, as this bride-like city. I have been standing on the roof of the house the last half-hour for air, and, as it was midnight, had an opportunity of seeing all the gay company - returning from an entertainment at the government-house; and I assure you I never witnessed anything that could compare with the splendour exhibited".

By the early 19th Century, Kolkata was split into two distinct areas – one British and the other Indian, known as the Black Town. The culture of both the regions, however starkly different, added to the vibrancy of the city itself. With the beginning of the 19th Century, the so-called Baboo Culture ushered in a new era in the Bengali culture. This neo-liberal thought process combined with the European fin de siècle decadence, mughal conservatism and indigenous revivalism brought about a socio-moral and political change, which fostered the Bengal Renaissance, an awakening of modern liberal thinking in 19th century Bengal which eventually spread to the rest of India. The Bengal Renaissance contributed greatly to various fields of art, literature and architecture and produced stalwarts like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ramakrishna and many others. However, the growth of liberal thinking in Bengal fueled nationalist sentiments which struck fear in the heart of the British Administration, so much so that, the then Governor General Lord Curzon ordered the partition of Bengal in 1905. This stunted the Bengal Renaissance to great extent.

Eventually, the capital of British India was shifted from Kolkata to Delhi in 1912. The funds that used to come for the

\*Corresponding author: Tel: +919831324679 Email Address: [sourodip.lahiri@gov.in](mailto:sourodip.lahiri@gov.in) [sourodip.lahiri@gmail.com](mailto:sourodip.lahiri@gmail.com)

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betterment of Kolkata as a capital city of British Empire in India was now reduced. This stunted the growth of Kolkata to a large extent.

Subsequently Kolkata faced a number of problems that further weakened its social, economical and cultural stature. The Great Famine of Bengal in 1943 coupled the state severely. More than 3 Lakh people died out of sheer malnutrition and starvation. Kolkata experienced an alarming influx of people from the rural areas who came in search of better living in the city.

Furthermore, communal riots during the Direct action Day and the subsequent partition of India in 1947 resulted in the influx of refugees to the city. The infrastructure of the city was not sufficient to handle such a burden of population. The rich families bought houses at exorbitant prices while the poorer people occupied vacant lands in the outskirts of the city and built modest houses to survive. Bengal received another influx of refugees during the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence. These people settled down in the vacant lands which later came to be known as colonies. Gradually, the Government recognized their citizenship and awarded the occupied plots to the residents as their own.

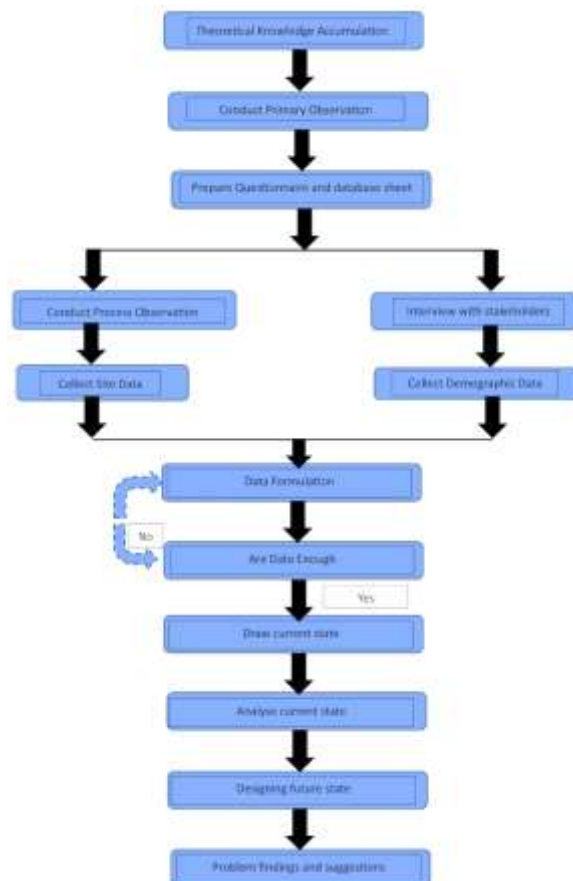
Kolkata was once again affected by the Naxalite Movement in the early seventies which broke the backbone of the student community. Many bright students were forced to leave the city in search for a peaceful life.

Amidst the doldrums of political unrest, there were novel efforts for cultural growth in the city. Rabindra Sadan was opened to the public in 1968 and became the hub of prime Bengali culture in the metropolitan city of Kolkata. Till date, Rabindra Sadan along with Academy of Fine Arts, Sisir Mancha, Nandan Cinema complex is the prime entertainment zone and cultural center for the Bengali society to view dramas, dance, cultural programmes and exhibitions. In independent India Kolkata faced many problems and remained cultural capital of India as Mumbai (Bombay) a financial capital and New Delhi an administrative capital. From 2000, the name of Calcutta was changed to Kolkata. The historian Nishit Ranjan Ray wrote (Ray, 1986), "Calcutta can claim to have a personality and character of its own. This stands revealed through its attainments in various fields of activities – artistic, literary, intellectual, philanthropic and political. No city in India organizes exhibitions on art and culture like Calcutta. Films produced in Calcutta’s studios are known to have earned international awards. The city easily tops the list of artists and men of letters to be found in one single city”.

### 3. Research Objective

How and what were the changes in Urban Setting of Khidderpore and Kolkata as a whole due to change in demography and socio cultural environment in the last 15 years?

#### 3.1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY



#### 4. Site study

In order to demonstrate the scope of the paper, a small area of Khidderpore, viz., Ward 77 under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation is selected. The region falls under a rich cultural influence which dates back to the early 18th century. The site has been studied in the following methodology:

- i. Literature survey.
- ii. Physical Survey
- iii. Dialogue with end user.

##### 4.1. LITERATURE SURVEY

In his book, 'EtihaseyKhidirpur', Samar Dutta states that as 'Rome was not built in a day, similarly it took years for Khidderpore to come to its present status and condition. Khidderpore find its reference as early as 1711 in the book 'the English Pilot'. Previously being a part of the Sunderbans. This region came under the jurisdiction of Calcutta Corporation in 1888 under the British raj.

Gradually, Khidderpore became inhabited by famous and noble families, who not only contributed to the gradual improvement of Khidderpore but also incurred a fervour of nobility – the Ghorals of Bhukailash and the Mukherjee family are few of them – ( reference in Calcutta Journal, dated 27th February,1882). The members of these families helped in building schools, clubs, libraries and gave patronage to cultural activities – namely Khidderpore Public Union Study – later came to be known as Hemchandra library, the Hindu Girl school,etc.

The region came be an important business area with the inception of Calcutta Port trust in 1870. With the setting up of trade route from Calcutta Port – western literature and arts – especially French art came into the knowledge of the people of the region. It was around this time that three well known poets – Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Rangalal Bandopadhyay and Hemchandra Bose – three beacons of Bengali literature– came into limelight. Later various libraries where set up in their honour. The region had a cultural ambience unlike any other place with regular cultural festivals taking place every now and then.

Currently, this region of cultural hegemony is fast changing due to the real estate boom. Due to population growth many old historic buildings have been demolished to pave way for the construction of new apartment complexes – urban islands. Many of the large open spaces have been barricaded – opening to the public only during festive season of durga puja. The traditional Bengali neighbourhood is losing out to the rampant surge of 'promoter regime'. The residents also feel threatened by the burgeoning non-hindu population from the surrounding areas as an increasing amount of old buildings owned by old Bengali families are demolished to make way for apartment complexes.

##### 4.2. PHYSICAL SURVEY

Physical survey has been done first in 2010 and then in 2021 to show a photographic representation of how the area has changed. The various facets of urban activities has been exhibited in the form of maps.

##### 4.2.1 Physical survey of study area and its representation through maps

The study area was surveyed visually and accordingly represented through various maps that give a general idea of the local demography and various cultural activities.

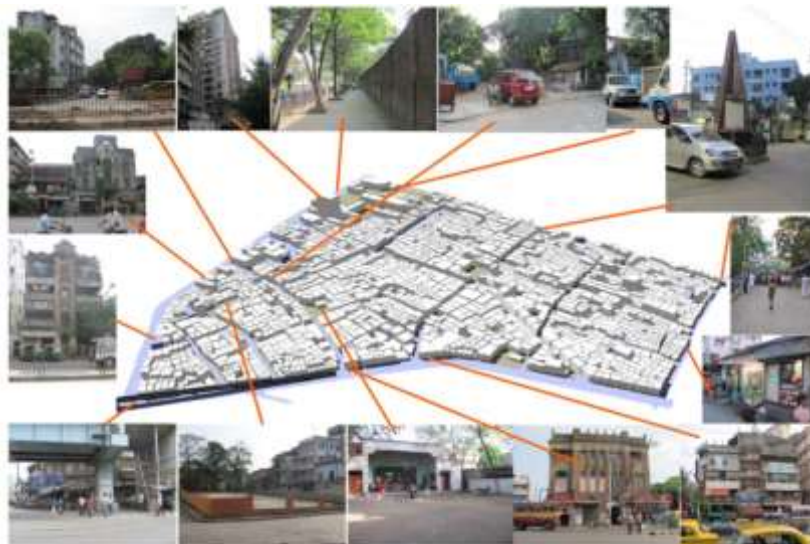


Figure 1.Site overview (2010)

The locality is primarily residential with mix of population of various religious groups. Every religious practices their own rituals. Three of the very well known schools of the city are located in this area.

The following maps represent the site from the point of view of building use, built environment analysis, tangible cultural heritage in the form of heritage buildings.

The ethnic character map not only shows the religious make up of the area but also various intangible cultural practices such as the location of durga puja pandals, procession routes,etc.

Various important gathering points are also identified where the locals usually flock together in the evening for gossip or 'ADDA' sessions.

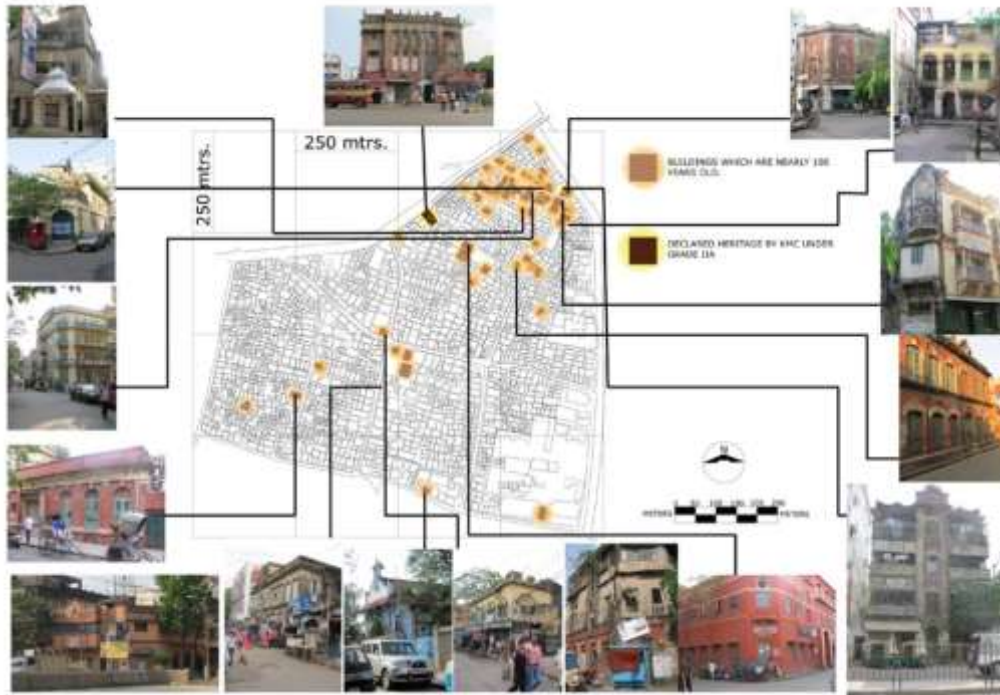


Figure 2. Historical buildings :Tangible Cultural Heritage, Site overview (2010)

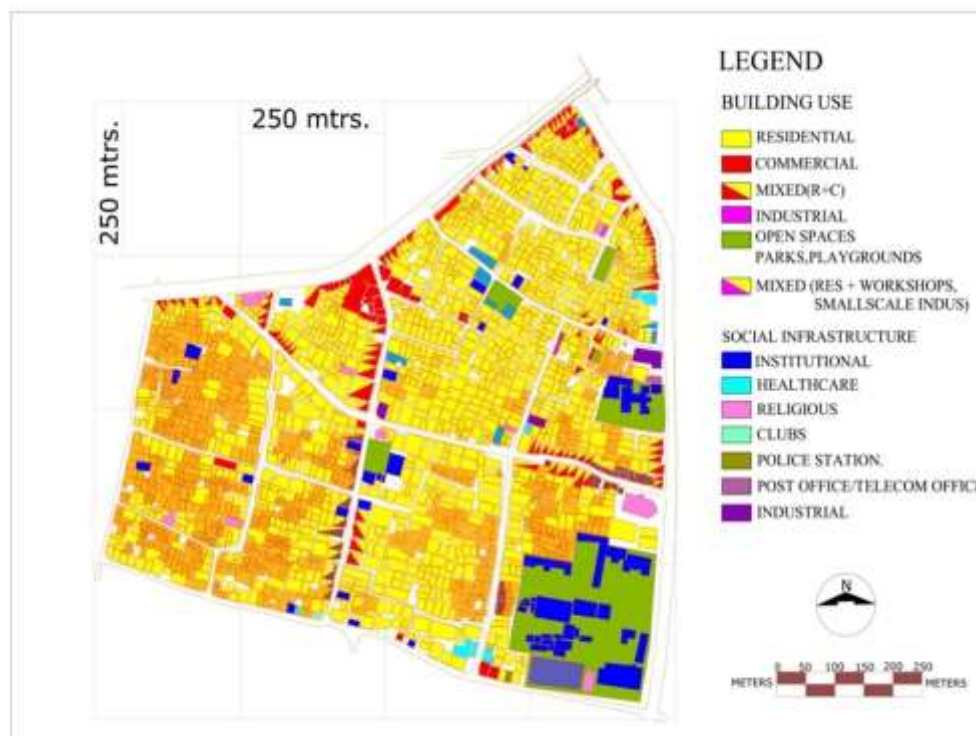


Figure 3. Building use (2010)

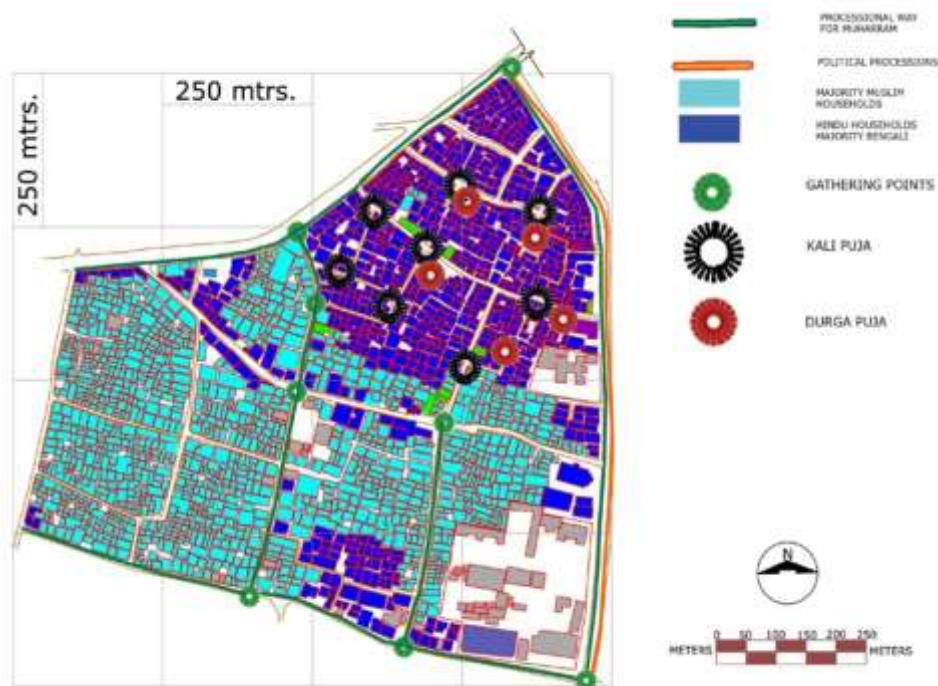


Figure 4. Ethnic character (2010)

4.2.2 Photographical survey showing before (2010) and after (2021) analysis



Figure 5. Before (2010)..... Old buildings with colonial character



Figure 6. After (2021) Old Buildings being demolished and being replaced by new apartment complexes

Many old buildings with historic character are being demolished for construction of modern apartment buildings. Open spaces such as children’s playgrounds, parks, etc. are being increasingly converted into social infrastructure. Tangible cultural heritage is seen in old buildings built in 18th and 19th centuries and early part of 20th century, many of the buildings often are at narrow and winding lane with courtyards for various activities and wide plinth level verandahs for gossip sessions. The style of architecture was Indo European, often classical and Palladian style with Indian motifs and forms.

Since 1990s there is economic growth and real estate boom in the city. Many historic buildings were demolished for construction of modern buildings, and thus the city’s architectural character and urban flavour was changed.

Various children’s parks, playgrounds have been converted into social infrastructure projects leaving no space for children to play , cultural practices etc.



Figure 7. Before (2010) Byam Samiti Park:  
A well known children's park



Figure 8. After (2021) Park converted to Booster Pumping station



Figure 9. Before (2010)



Figure 10. Location of tree remaining the same Apartments coming up in close vicinity to re-place the slums After (2021)

## 5. Analysis

The study of the site involved many parameters. For proper comprehension of a locality, the past and present situations need to be understood in order to prepare a roadmap for the future.

- From the literature survey it is understood that the locality catered to a vast majority Bengali community that was culturally enriched and participated actively discourses. The locality once had characteristically large joint families.
- With the breaking up of joint family structure, the younger generation has gradually moved out of the locality. For better economic prospects the local youth have ventured leaving old parents. The vacuum so created is being filled up with a section of the population alien to the locality and as such asympathetic to the local culture and tradition.

- Durga Puja in Kolkata was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021. However, with dwindling number of stakeholders, these local puja committees are contemplating completely stopping the activity.
- There is no control of the built environment and as such the traditional local architecture is losing the age old buildings and being fast replaced by character less apartment buildings that are starkly different architecturally.
- In such a scenario as the locality is losing its Bengali character, the neighbourhood is losing its tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- In such a scenario, local interventions with proper SOP are required that can safeguard both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage.
- A sense of place is felt on many streets, squares and plazas. Every street is different with character and flavour. These streets are a few examples to become spines to connect the nodal points. The streets are to be rejuvenated.
- Architectural design today has become stereotyped spaces. Courtyards, ground level pedestrian plinth and plaza etc. are to be introduced to give the opportunity to revive some intangible aspects of Bengali culture. A mixed land-use with coffee, tea shops, art and handicraft shop, cyber café etc. will have to be encouraged in the new housing estates also.

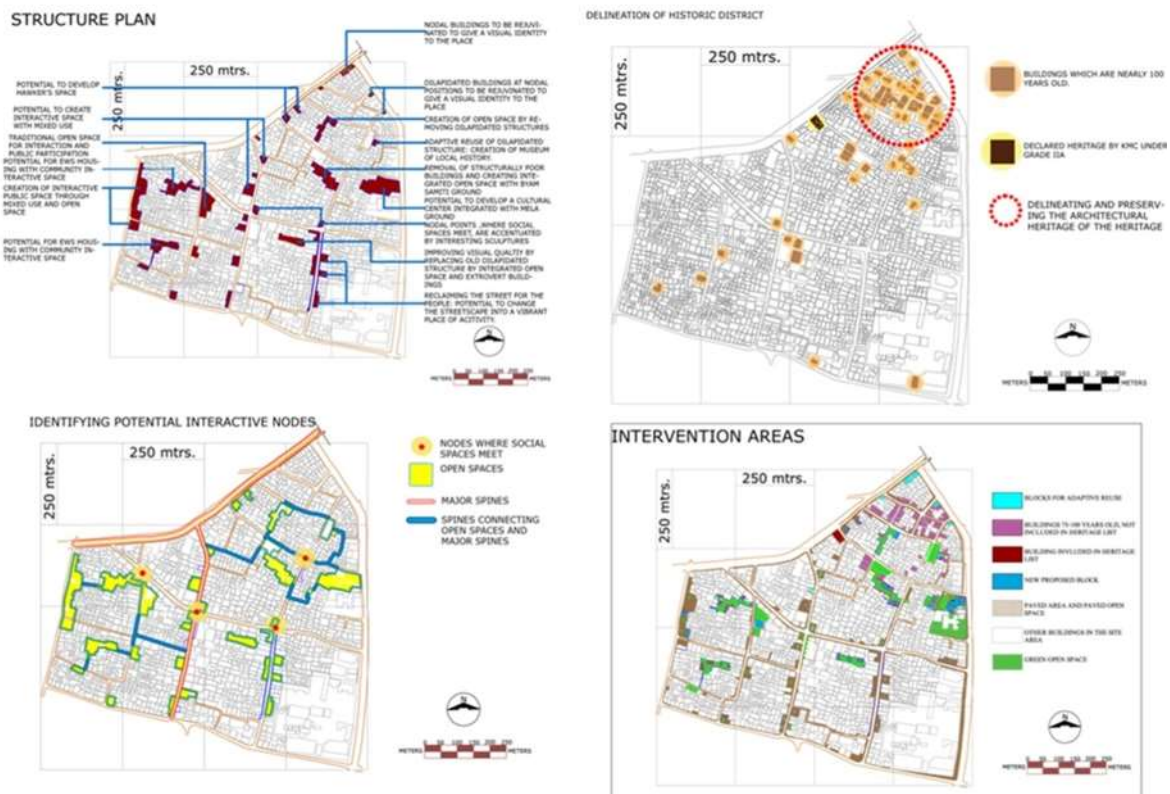


Figure 11. Identifying major issues.

## 6. Conclusion

Indigenous Bengali architecture is almost lost in the modern built environment. Rejuvenation and conservation of tangible and intangible Bengali cultural heritage is required along with new spaces at strategic locations need to be developed for cultural growth.

Public realm requires accommodating a centralized decentralization (Danish) and a cultural road map for contested spaces which can enable the growth of indigenous Bengali culture. Development should be on a human scale and makes an individual feel at ease with the surroundings. Encouraging mixed use development with small coffee shops, cyber cafes in a neighbourhood can foster participation. Eventually spaces are for people – the public realm needs to accommodate the well being of an individual, not only by respecting the personal space, but also encouraging an environment that can foster a sense of kinship. In a recent visit to the city, Ar.B.V.Doshi has said:

“ Calcutta needs vibrant interactive forums and cultural institutions as contemporary icons not a grand getaway to mimic fabled archways from other cities.....what this city needs are relaxed public spaces where people can meet by chance and not by design and start a dialogue.”(Telegraph Metro,(2011)

A network of cultural centers integrated with urban public spaces acts as a stage for the generation of cultural through public participation in the interest of the society. In such a scenario, cultural enrichment becomes an end result while the urban public spaces are used as a tool to achieve the end result.

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Figure 12. Pritzker Winner Architect B. V. Doshi Call for Public Spaces