

Fossils of the Future: Notes on Rememory and the Urban

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In her invocation of 'rememory', Toni Morrison's assertion was to remind herself, and us all, of why history and memory stand apart. In racialised societies, she wrote, there are archives in which the histories of entire peoples find no place, or perhaps worse, find inclusion only at the cost of distortion. To turn to memory was to write against the silences of these archives, to refuse both recorded history and memorylessness. Yet, in doing so, Morrison argued that she fought equally against constructing memories too certain or authoritative, that could slip back into acting like history, ready to close rather than open a plural, ephemeral and complex remembrance—a 'pitched battle against remembering and forgetting.'

That any archive of urban India bears such erasures, distortions and silences is a self-evident truth. Our maps have long hidden more than what they revealed, our Master Plans are stubborn and deliberate in evading the real city, our everyday is lined with faultlines of caste, language, religion, and gender that produce innumerable cities and publics in one. How does one then bear witness? How does one excavate the present—find seeds, moments, objects and landscapes that can gesture to what is and what may become? How does one tell a story, at least from, if not of, urban India? In *Rememory*, Gauri Gill turns to the unlikeliest of archives: to the built environment of our cities, to public and intimate material landscapes and lifeworlds. The built environment has historically been the archive not of memory but precisely of history—of intention and opportunity, power writ into sand, brick and mortar, the realisation of the ability to build one's stake in the city into its ground.



Grand Trunk Road, Delhi 2007 (c)



Kolkata 2009 (a)

In Gill's hands, these material lifeworlds are more supple, uncertain and intimate. This collection is a fragmented archive of urban India. As rememory, it could be nothing else. What else is the urban in India but a sleight of hand, a gesture always incomplete, a settling rather than a settlement, a patchwork of cement and tarpaulin, a gate that opens onto a road not yet built, concrete rods that sink deeper into marshland convinced they can persuade it to hold, and hold on. Perhaps then, *Rememory* is an archive of fragments, insisting on, yet also resisting, reassembling.

As viewers, this tension holds us through the series. There are no tropes here to grasp, no easy narratives across images, no threads among groupings. This is unsurprising. Plans, grids, patterns—the hallmarks of modernist urban thought—are not Gill's archive. They appear as caricatures in her work: a model of the Indus Valley Civilisation encased in glass, alongside a government museum tableau of miniature earth movers that seem playful rather than

powerful [*Chennai 2011 (a) and (b)*]. The city is not made or settled through its plans. It is, as Jai Sen once described it, unintended. Yet perhaps it is better thought of as being free of any singular intention, even the grandest and most powerful. In that freedom lies both its possibility and its abandonment. One can taste both in the haunting building shells of *Mumbai 2012 (b, c)*, *Jodhpur 2006* and *Gurgaon 2004 (a)*. These are individual structures, some with their backs turned to the city's gaze, others almost hollow, inviting that same gaze to simply pass through. The buildings are both as yet unoccupied or freshly occupied, and not quite lived in but also already abandoned. They are presented, even framed, as relics. Fossils, perhaps, but not of the past. Fossils of the future—shells awaiting what could come, holding ground, uncertain of which direction time and tide will take.



Bikaner 2012 (b)

There are cities in which time materialises in peculiar ways. Teresa Caldeira, a Brazilian anthropologist, writes of the peripheral urbanisation of cities of the global south as a mode of urbanisation in tension with the official logics of planning, property, law and labour. These are auto-constructed cities, she argues, following the Latin American term for the practice of self-building, occupation and rebuilding that describes cities built as much by people as by the state or the formal market. She argues that the cities that result are then necessarily patchworks—intention and defiance sitting next to each other, legal and illegal co-terminus, the public and the private competing, control never quite certain. Gill's work breathes in these multiple scales and registers of time and place. In *Bikaner 2004 (a)* and *2012 (b)*, we see an adorned gate, metal curved and shiny, aesthetic choices on display to show the completion of a private accumulation, an arrival and a home. Yet the gate is not just to welcome, to open, to let in, but to defy, guard and keep out. Outside

the gate, the road lies crumbling, the ramp is broken. The completed house exists in the incomplete city. The rhythms of auto-construction do not follow the intended logics of urbanisation. Homes do not wait for roads, toilets do not wait for pipes, gates do not wait for guests at the door. The city builds in patchwork, each fragment catching up with another but from different starting lines, in all directions of time and space. The history of the city is not told through the memory that these structures hold. The history of the city is nothing but the memory that these structures hold.

Even when the built form bears the power of capital, of being complete in one go, of controlling time, its uncertainties never reduce. In image after image of tall, imposing towers [*Bengaluru 2015; Kolkata 2015; Mumbai 2015*], we see the buildings with their legs cut off. Look up, the camera says, see the imposing façade, the endless floors, the magical rise, the certainty, the weight of the building, the order, the logic. Believe. Don't ask what lies beyond the plot boundaries. Like the rendered images that sell us real estate in our daily newspapers, and that are interwoven here through the 'real' buildings [*Mumbai 2012 (o), (v), Mumbai 2013 (g) and (j)*] the city beyond the site, beyond the building, must be blurred, hidden, photoshopped, cropped or contain swimming pools, expensive cars, palm trees and gleaming roads. The legless buildings then appear equally uncertain of their foothold in the city. The architect, the builder, the investor are all in complete control of the site, and at a loss once they step outside its boundaries.



Mumbai 2012 (g)



Mumbai 2012 (s)



Faridabad 2007 (c)

And so, in some sense, urban residents retreat to the private, marking time in other ways. Some seek to forget it, giving in to an urge to be placeless within the interiors of *Mumbai 2012* (p, q, r, s, t). Some turn entirely inward, tracing life and the boundaries of one's world in the intimate, in the changing of cabinet doors in *New Delhi 2013* (a). Yet one of the questions Gill leaves us with across all her images is precisely whether the private in urban India can be separated anymore as the public itself fragments, gates up and encloses, using saplings and barricades in a half-hearted attempt to draw lines in the sand like in *Faridabad 2007* (c). The interiority of these images, their emptiness, the focus on the built form, the absence of people across the images, one can hear Gill ask: is it possible for a people to come together in material landscapes such as this?



Nokha 2004 (a)

Yet in every image of experimentation, expression, innovation in *Nokha 2004* (a), *Ghaziabad 2004* (a), or *Bikaner 2004* (b), you sense people. Just as you risk being too certain in reassembling these images as despair, isolation and fragmentation, you sense memory, choices, presences and claims onto the auto-constructed city. You stop yourself from the certainty against which Morrison warned, knowing that belonging may fracture but does not cease, that even unintended cities have rhythms, orders and possibilities beyond the dystopic, that these images also add up to something more than the sum of their parts, just like the city somehow always does. These are also cities, Gill seems to insist, as much as the spectacular images of monuments, maps of train lines, buildings of government, the *maidans*, esplanades and beachfronts. They just need to be reassembled a different way. Perhaps like the water tank shaped like Maruti 800, poised this time to take off from the roof of *Jaipur 2008* (a).

In the end, Gill's choice to see the city through its material landscapes and objects feels like a quiet inside joke. Here is *terra nullis*, the empty butter paper sheet of the master planner, the city without pesky, personality-filled humans that get in the way of material symmetry, order, networks and plans. Nature can be contained [*Grand Trunk Road 2007 (a)*, *Faridabad 2007 (b)*], its memory evoked in symbols rather than experienced in landscapes. Animals can be displayed rather than smelt, touched or encountered [*New Delhi 2006 (b)*]. And it is from within this very terrain, in the belly of the beast, that Gill asks us to reassemble, to remember as rememory and not as nostalgia, to face both possibility and abandonment, and to recentre ourselves in the cities that we are building and that are being built all around us.



New Delhi 2006 (b)

New Delhi
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