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Paras, Palaces, Pathogens: frameworks for the growth of Calcutta, 1800–1850

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THE HISTORICAL FABRIC OF CALCUTTA incorporates both the perspective of indigenous knowledges and practices, as well as successive regimes of “improvements” that British colonial authorities sought to introduce in the period 1798–1850. In the face of these diverse interests the urban fabric served as a crucial medium for the negotiation of difference. Portions of the indigenous population selectively adapted their building designs and social practices to British conventions, while protecting other patterns and practices in efforts both to accommodate and to maintain difference. [Colonial cities, urban planning, hygiene, India, Calcutta]

Negotiating Difference

A CONSIDERABLE BODY OF URBAN history has been written from the perspective of the city as something differentiated—from the hinterland, from the pastoral and agrarian, from the innocent but uncivilized—differentiated, in other words, from the non-urban. Much of this is the legacy of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, for a variety of reasons: Industrialization of Western economies produced new cities, and changes in old cities, such that their grided and mechanized terrains came to be wholly unlike anything to be found in “nature.” New kinds of labor, forms of production, and rhythms of time, all specific to the city, differentiated it as a kind of place very distinct from its rural surroundings. The economic welfare of the manufacturing city depended on appropriation of resources from elsewhere, leading to the conceptualization of city and country in binary terms as loci of production and extraction. The economic surplus of industrializing societies permitted new patterns of taste and etiquette, and new modes of consumption that served to dis-
tistinguish urban from rural life (Braudel 1985). New kinds of housing—in many cases far denser, more insalubrious, more highly regimented, less exposed to any expanse of vegetation than ever before, and increasingly separated from place of employment—made the city not just a different place in which to live, but the material basis of a new, distinctly modern, distinctly urban consciousness (Baudelaire 1964; Engels 1845; Lees 1985).

Certainly one explanation for historiographical concentration on differences between city and non-city is found in the economic imperatives of the times in which those histories have been written: Cities, in order to survive as engines of industrial capitalism, need to retain and constantly enhance their capacity to produce wealth. This encourages an emphasis in historical inquiry on ways in which the city—for better or worse—has been able to sustain the production of wealth. And such studies, in turn, focusing on matters such as politics, economic development, labor, housing, infrastructure, class and other social relations, necessarily emphasize the city as a discrete domain to be demarcated and differentiated from its surrounding environment.¹

Of course such an approach serves well the purposes of both colonialism and development, since it recognizes the city in terms that are congruent with the goals of such enterprises. For just the same reasons it has proved far more difficult to fashion an approach that can recognize the city as a fragmented or discontinuous domain. Such an approach needs to understand urban spaces as shaped in ways that may intersect yet fail to recognize one another, ways that facilitate activities that may be inconsistent with or antithetical to activities in adjacent and overlapping spaces—where, for example, contestation is not just between labor and capital for a larger share of the same enterprise, but between populations who do not necessarily recognize each others' interests.

An approach based on difference thus offers the opportunity for a distinct range of insights. Understood as a domain of difference, the city can be recognized in far more complex terms. It can be examined as a terrain of negotiation among various interests, and those negotiations can be recognized in the patterns, proportions, and dimensions of the diverse types of urban fabrics that are built, and in distinct activities and practices that those fabrics sustain.

Particularly when the processes of colonialism and development are seen in terms of engagement and struggle (as opposed to unproblematic faits accomplis), to approach the city as a domain of difference allows a more complex understanding of the very nature
of a city and the cultures that it sustains. Indeed the struggle over culture, including everything from gender roles and subjectivity to economic and political policy, is in many respects a struggle over place, and particularly over the terms in which given places, or locales, are defined—and the manner in which place and locale, in turn, are inextricably implicated in the construction of consciousness, meaning, and identity (cf. Massey 1994:7, 168–169).

In the case of a colonial city such as Calcutta, the foremost city in India for most of the British period, it may be especially fruitful to proceed in such a fashion. For the city then can be understood as the terrain on which distinct cultures, each with its own practices and expectations, sought to sustain those practices and expectations in negotiation with each other. Understanding urban space thus as material that is produced to advance and sustain the interests of a given individual, group, or culture, the city comes to be seen as a terrain of negotiation among all the diverse elements within it, by all the means that are at their disposal—economic, legal, moral, religious, political, technological, architectural, stylistic, sartorial, rhetorical, culinary, and so forth (Knesl 1984; Lefebvre 1991). Different cultures that jointly inhabit such a terrain, of course, have frequent opportunities to encounter the ways in which others articulate their spaces. These may be encountered with varying degrees of understanding; for while one cannot remain blind to the very real material differences of the built environment, the terms in which any given culture interprets those differences are often predicated on its own interests and beliefs and the degree to which they are congruent with, or threatened by, the other’s spatial regimes.

Focusing in this manner on Calcutta from the end of the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the following sections of this paper explore the terms—sometimes competing, sometimes concordant, and always changing—in which indigenes and colonizers articulated urban space. For all parties the city was a domain of opportunity. Nevertheless to realize that opportunity required articulation of spatial frameworks that defined subjectivity, community, authority, trade, wealth—indeed the full range of human social concerns—in ways that could negotiate their existence successfully in the face of different and similar claims from other interests.
Indigenous and British
Spatial Knowledges

The site now occupied by the city of Calcutta had been occupied by indigenous trading castes for well over two centuries before the British arrival in 1690 (figure 1). That year, however, the English East India Company secured permission from the Indian authorities to establish a mercantile settlement there. Unlike Spanish or French colonies, Calcutta was neither settled by Crown initiative nor administered under Crown authority. Thus the highly structured administrative regimes and planning regimens customary in French or Spanish colonies were absent in the city.

Rather, Calcutta developed as an entrepôt of a private mercantile company. Nevertheless within a few decades this company had exceeded the limited trading objectives originally envisioned by its English founders in London as well as by Indian authorities in Delhi and Bengal. It had fortified not only its trading offices but also the urban environs, and eventually it became a significant military power in the region. It soon held virtual title to Calcutta and surrounding districts, and legal authority as well over the inhabitants and their activities. By the late eighteenth century the East India Company had become a civil and military force that had thoroughly redefined political and economic relations in Bengal and the rest of India (Alavi 1980; Lawson 1993; Marshall 1976). In the process, it redefined much of the landscape of Calcutta as a military, administrative, and elite residential environment, configured primarily to facilitate the principal purpose of the Company as an engine of extraction.

This British-fashioned landscape was considerably at odds with indigenous patterns of urban space, but it occupied only a portion of the city's total area. Eventually the British differentiated Company-occupied areas as the "White Town" in contrast to the indigenous "Black Town," but unlike in Madras, where the terms "Black Town" and "White Town" were well established before mid-century, these terms did not come into common use in Calcutta until late in the eighteenth century. Indeed before mid-century, when the balance of power in Calcutta and surrounding areas was decidedly in favor of the Nawab of Bengal (and not the East India Company), the English presence in Calcutta had not yet condensed into just the few distinct areas that subsequently became known as the "White Town." Significantly the shift toward con-
centration of the “White” presence came after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the subsequent substantial increase in British power and authority.

And even then, in the greater process of urban cross-cultural negotiation these “White” areas made numerous concessions to indigenous practices, just as European conventions were selectively adopted in some “Black” areas. To begin examining the processes of negotiation and accommodation that obtained here, it will be useful first to explore indigenous modes of forming urban space in terms of streets, locales, commerce, and residence.

Streets and Locales

ONE OF THE MOST striking differences between British and Indian parts of Calcutta is in the character of their respective street spaces. The bureaucratic, commercial, and domestic enclaves of British Calcutta are unmistakably delineated in terms of broad, regular thoroughfares that bound discrete city blocks. In indigenous portions of Calcutta, people and goods traverse a web of streets and lanes that split into ever narrower alleys and paths (figure 2). Unlike the British cartographic partitioning system of corridors and blocks, indigenous portions of the city resemble a capillary system penetrating a dense and complex material. In indigenous portions of Calcutta streets and lanes seldom allow sightlines beyond the present vicinity, thus concentrating one’s perception on an immediate locale. By contrast, the British corridor-streets emphasize the spatial capacity to transcend (and thus suppress) locality in favor of systematic uniformity and control over a much wider domain.

Indigenous urban space in Calcutta was organized according to forms of spatial knowledge that were very different from those of the British. The overlapping and intersecting dimensions of that indigenous knowledge included such parameters as family, caste, occupation, wealth, and spirituality. In terms of spiritual presence alone, the contrast between Indian and European space was, and
remains, striking. In Indian streets, countless small shrines are located along each side, sometimes associated with building entrances and sometimes oriented toward the street itself. Each of these shrines serves to gather and concentrate a spiritual presence that distinguishes and animates the space through which the devotee moves, day in and day out. Such a spiritual presence is intensified when images of deities are carried through streets in large, sometimes tumultuous processions during times of festivals. European spirituality, in contrast, is severely circumscribed: The locale where one expects to encounter a spiritual presence is generally inside a specific structure—a church or a temple—and these are comparatively few and far between. Indeed the exterior walls of European buildings of worship serve to divide sacred from secular, thus distinguishing both the street and the city at large as realms of the profane and heathen. And in this process of physically demarcating its presence as a religious institution, the church simultaneously negates that presence as an occasion for frequent and regular practice in numerous locales throughout the city (de Certeau 1984, Massey 1994).

Indian regard for the complexity and permeability of urban space is even more apparent in the apparatus according to which individual locales are constituted. This apparatus comprises an overlapping, heterogeneous array of categories, as manifested in the naming practices that differentiate these locales (Gupta 1993; Mitra 1889; Thankappan Nair 1987; Thankappan Nair 1990; Sinha 1978). European naming practices invoke an entirely different episteme. Most prominent are personal names of early civil, military, and mercantile figures. In Calcutta, by far the most common names are those that distinguish a place according to profession, trade, caste, family, and the place of origin of the people living there. Less frequently, reference is made to characteristics of
the site itself, including the names of god(s) worshipped there, or physical features such as reservoirs ("tanks"), trees, groves, and avenues. To these names one of several suffixes might be added to suggest the scale of the place being described, such as tola, a ward or quarter, tuli, the diminutive of tola and so a smaller quarter, and para, a term applicable to a small locality in which the residents generally acknowledge a shared community identity.³

Thus one finds tolas and tulis named after various trades (e.g., fishermen, oil pressers, cowherds or milkmen, sailors, merchants, blanket sellers, pat-painters, conch-workers, potters), as well as gods worshipped there (e.g., Manasatala, Panchanantala, Shibatala); and paras likewise named after trades (bell metal workers, coppersmiths, tailors, watchmen, washermen, cobblers) as well as caste and place of origin (Teli para, for example, the para of the Teli caste, or Uriyapara, the para of migrants from Orissa).

In sum, knowledge of the Indian portions of the city was a knowledge of discrete localities identified primarily in terms of the identities and activities of the people who lived and worked there. Implicit in this knowledge, and therefore in this space, were hierarchies of caste, wealth, and prestige, a spatialization sustaining the various dispositions and practices of different segments of Bengali society, but hardly consistent with (even inimical to) British dispositions toward administrative simplicity and uniformity.

Commerce and Residence

In sympathetic tension with this geography of trade, caste, family, religion, place of origin, and site are the specific patterns according to which trade and housing came to be concentrated. Distinct from, yet parallel to, the tendency of certain castes and trades to settle and work in specific locales of the city, marketplaces were established for the sale of specific commodities. These included: hats, markets held in a certain location on a fixed day once or twice a week, e.g., for selling mangrove wood, yogurt, or chicken; ganjes, larger, more established markets for trading certain commodities, e.g., Baliganj, the sand market; and bazars, groups of stalls and shops, commonly developed by landowning magnates, and rented to merchants for selling specialty goods and/or general retail items.
In general bazars differed from the other types of markets in that they were not limited to a single commodity, and in that they were entrepreneurial ventures established and controlled by a single individual or family (Sreemani 1994). Their growth may be attributed in substantial measure to the presence of the British and the elevated level of trade necessary to sustain both the laboring and entrepreneurial populations of such a rapidly growing city.

By holding or asserting exclusive rights to trade in certain commodities or in certain areas, owners tended to concentrate trade at specific, insular sites, over which they conceded little municipal intervention (Fever Hospital Committee 1838b: 6, 11, 14, 17, 23). Those entrepreneurs and other elites concentrated their residential compounds in a similar manner. Well into the early nineteenth century wealthy landowners and traders typically would build private residential compounds on relatively large tracts of land, generally at some distance from the landholdings and compounds of other such figures. The land immediately surrounding the compound itself then would be let to people of various castes and strata, partly for purposes of rent income, and partly to have available the human resources necessary to provide labor and services for the main household. Thus the landscape of indigenous Calcutta was in effect a domain of dispersed “pyramids” of wealth, the rentiers literally living high off the rents of those surrounding them. Although Bengali culture was clearly stratified, such patterns of residential space allowed diverse strata to live in close proximity to one another.

The British elites in Calcutta built large residences either in discrete residential enclaves (e.g., Garden Reach, Chowringhee), or as isolated “garden house” retreats well outside the city. In contrast, Indian elite residences were deployed at some distance from each other across the face of the city, thus maintaining both in
show and in practice the elite family's hegemony over the locale, its population, and their practices.

But eventually it became advantageous for certain Indian elites to modify this pattern of residential space by adapting a British model for use in indigenous portions of the city. Until the first quarter of the nineteenth century there had been in the Indian portions of Calcutta no discrete class-defined residential enclaves, from which lesser strata of the population and nonresidential activities were banished (or segregated) to different portions of the town. But such enclaves did appear in North Calcutta beginning in the early nineteenth century: They included most notably Jorosanko (Mukherjee 1989–1990; Deb 1990), as well as Shyampukur, Shobabazar, Paikpara, and Kumartuli (figure 3). Following the pattern of such English detached residential enclaves as Chowringhee and Garden Reach, originating in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Archer 1997), indigenous entrepreneurs, merchants, and financiers began to emulate this model of an elite enclave. Such spatial segregation of an economic elite as a class, which signaled their distancing from many aspects of Bengali culture, was nevertheless not yet a sign of Indian economic capitulation nor of their cultural “corruption” by the British. It was, rather, an instrumental means by which Indians realized in material terms changes in their status, practices, and identity as merchant elites. It was part of a larger ongoing process of spatial differentiation, negotiating not only their relations with the British, but also articulating a change in their relation to Bengali culture, in effect using British conventions to extract themselves from indigenous structures of caste and status.

Colonial Mercantile Space

Quite unlike the traditional Bengali organization of space according to such factors as trade, caste, family, place of origin, and religion, British space was increasingly defined in terms of districts that sustained distinct functions (King 1976). These included: administration, as with Writers Buildings and the area around Tank Square; defense, particularly the Fort and its surrounding field of fire, the Esplanade; trade, in mercantile offices, warehouses, and the like along the riverfront; institutions such as offices, clubs, theaters, and churches along and near Esplanade Row; leisure, along promenades
around Tank Square, on the Esplanade, and along the Strand, as well as at the Course and the Botanic Garden; and perhaps the most isolated of all British urban functions, residence, in detached enclaves such as Chowringhee and Garden Reach (Archer 1997). Articulation of the city in terms of functionally distinguishable areas was of course well suited to its role as an instrument of economic extraction. The spaces produced were thus well suited to the purposes of the East India Company, its merchants, and, later, the Crown.3

Throughout the first century of the colonial presence in Calcutta, indigenous and colonial modes of urban spatial organization existed in dynamic tension with each other—a process of negotiation in which each was at odds with, yet dependent on the other. Instead of exercising absolute control over the city, spatially, politically, or economically, the British concentrated their hegemony in ways that made profitable use of indigenous systems of production, finance, and trade. Thus absent from the British matrix of functionally-defined districts were places for production, housing, and market needs of the indigenous population. This they left, intentionally and indifferently, to be the fabric of the “Black Town.” Nor did Indian sectors of the city accommodate all the features of a mercantile entrepôt. For although the volume and value of the indigenes’ production depended on the global trade that the British facilitated, their locales included no military, legal, or bureaucratic institutions suited to the pursuit of international trade.

When, on the other hand, indigenous residents of Calcutta did appropriate British paradigms, they did so selectively, and consistently resisted others. Indian appropriation of European residential patterns, for example, was instrumental not only in articulating certain accommodations to the British social and economic establishment, but also in extricating themselves from certain social relations within the Indian community. Yet in other respects, maintaining the spatial environment according to indigenous patterns aided their dissociation from, and even resistance to, colonial influence. A neoclassical facade on a dwelling, for example, made a claim within the Indian community for a certain kind of influence and prestige, and appealed to English visitors by suggesting acceptance of Western standards (figure 4). But it did not necessarily indicate acceptance by the family inside of any and all things European. Indeed, even parlors furnished in European furniture, which frequently were found in elite dwellings, did little to change the traditional organization of the overall household around one or
more traditional interior courtyards, inclusion of the *thakurbari*
and other specialized household spaces, and close observation of
the rules of caste and *purdah*.

As we are reminded by numerous English accounts of “devious”
and “wily” Indians, it may have been beyond the capacity of
indigenous resources to oust the colo-
nial regime, but subverting it to one’s
own ends was the goal of many an
Indian. Many British visitors, on visit-
ing portions of the Indian city, charac-
terized what they saw as colorful, pictur-
esque, fearsome, or bewildering, as
numerous diaries and travel accounts
attest. In many, perhaps a majority, of
such cases, these descriptions were
recognition that the visitor had genuine
difficulty understanding the spaces
being encountered. The most frequent
solution was to bracket the observation
according to a more familiar category of
experience, such as the “picturesque.”
Crooked narrow lanes, crowded with
strangely-dressed people carrying on
unfamiliar activities in foreign lan-
guages, were menacing in many degrees.
Such lanes, which could end in a web of
narrow cul-de-sacs, or continue for sub-
stantial distances with no outlet at all,
offered no ready escape. Since they
twisted and wound frequently, there was little opportunity to
maintain visual contact with points of safety or to foresee danger.
And business transactions were carried out according to conven-
tions of which the visitor would have little or no knowledge. In
all these respects and more, a European would have felt disorient-
ed, even trapped. Insofar as the sights, sounds, smells, and practices
encountered were so different from what one “knew” to be right
and proper, the fear of ready danger or contamination was often at
hand.

For the English, who were interested in trade more than terri-

tory, and profit more than administration, it was easier to bracket
such encounters (e.g., as part of the colorful “Black Town”) than
to remake already lucrative portions of the city. Similarly the dis-
parities in spatial knowledge were important to the Indian popula-

Figure 4. *House in Chitpore Road, Calcutta.*
(Photograph by author)
But just as Wellesley's imperialistic objectives required imposition of a new political and military order on the subcontinent, so he foresaw the need to headquarter this undertaking in a city whose spatial apparatus might better sustain it. Imperial Aspirations: Palaces and Authority

BY THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH century, however, circumstances both in India and in England had begun to foster a new agenda of political and military imperialism which, in turn, precipitated a series of changes in the fabric and scale of the city of Calcutta. The advent of that new agenda could well be dated to the arrival from London in 1798 of Governor-General Richard Colley Wellesley. A chief pursuit of his seven-year tenure was the aggressive extension of British authority across the subcontinent. But Wellesley's efforts also extended to remaking the physical space of the city, which he explicitly concluded was necessary in order to assert an increased political authority and to legitimize the presence of Britain as an imperial power. Wanting to transform Calcutta from a mercantile entrepôt into the proper instrument for extension of empire, Wellesley soon conceived the opportunity to convert the very fabric of the city into a physical apparatus of imperialism.

Much as Wellesley's vision repudiated the official policy of "dual government" instituted under an earlier Governor, Robert Clive, he also recognized the need to rearticulate the space of the city in a manner that would advance and sustain (and no longer serve to subvert) a singular imperial hegemony. The dual city that existed on his arrival, a mosaic of overlapping, incongruent spatial frameworks, was well suited to the Company's mercantile objectives during its first century of occupation. But just as Wellesley's imperialistic objectives required imposition of a new political and military order on the subcontinent, so he foresaw the need to headquarter this undertaking in a city whose spatial apparatus might better sustain it. Given the modest size of the British colonial presence compared to the indigenous population and com-
mercial infrastructure, this clearly could not have been a process of remaking the city a single vision. Rather, Wellesley’s approach involved the introduction of a new order into the urban fabric, one that no longer afforded even the ostensible degree of indigenous autonomy posited in a “dual city.” The new order introduced a hierarchized space that dually ranked indigenous and European cultures, both relative to each other and in relation to the supreme status and authority of the British imperial enterprise.

An elementary but crucial step in this process was for Wellesley to bracket and dismiss the stake of the indigenous population in the city. Undertaking a position almost paradigmatic of what later would be characterized as Orientalism, he declared that the “interests” of the Indian population included no political principles or form of government, but rather consisted only of religion, customs, and domestic concerns (Stokes 1959:8). Bengali culture, in other words, was to be depoliticized and the remains partitioned off into “safe” categories, so that what remained would have no ground on which to pose a claim to expanding English authority and control (Stokes 1959:xiii). On the basis of such an ideological position—which by no means had fully characterized previous Company administrations—Wellesley set the stage for remaking the city in a manner that would devalue indigenous interests and physically recast it as a seat of European empire.

Nor was the scope of Wellesley’s contempt limited to Bengali culture. He also criticized the “stupidity and ill-bred familiarity” of English society (Davies 1987:63), which evidently accorded as poorly with his imperial objectives as Bengali practices. The imperialist stance that he aimed to construct, in other words, had to be situated in a hierarchy rising above both local cultures. His objective was to transform his role and position as Governor-General from that of a semi-autonomous representative of Company and Crown, charged with overseeing a trading enterprise, into that of a quasi-monarch (Davies 1987:63; Stokes 1959:10) becoming not only the principal framer of the colonial agenda but also the arbiter of standards for both European and indigenous constituencies.
The first object of Wellesley’s attention was the existing official governor’s residence, seen here on the right side of a 1793 view (figure 5) as it existed on his arrival. Unexceptional in scale and woven fairly tightly into the fabric of the old trading center, it was insufficiently different from the dwellings of many prosperous Europeans living nearby. Living there forced Wellesley to identify too closely with the mercantile purposes of the Company and its personnel. His own remarks convey the architectural discomfort: “India,” he said, “should be governed from a palace, not from a counting house, with the ideas of a prince, not with those of a retail dealer in muslin and indigo” (Deb 1977:40). In order to decontaminate the seat of authority, it clearly had to be separated from the base transactions that sustained the trading center.

His solution was to carve out an imperial island covering twenty-six acres at the very center of the city, requiring the demolition of the old Government House, the old Council House, and sixteen private mansions, some of them erected only within the last five years (Hickey 1913–1925,4:236–237). Begun in 1799, the vast new palace that arose at Wellesley’s behest in the center of this compound dramatically transformed the spatial relations of the central city (figures 6, 7).

The architectural hierarchies of status and prestige to either side of Government House, along Esplanade Row, were completely revamped. Unlike its predecessor, the new structure was no longer one mansion among several of comparable scale. Instead it wholly dominated all others. Indeed, by appropriating and fencing off an extensive tract of ground beyond its south front, the new building exacted an additional act of bodily deference by virtually all who went past (as shown in figure 8, Government House grounds, shaded dark, force a considerable detour in east–west traffic). Traffic along the main east–west thoroughfare now had to make a long and significant detour around those grounds, which
now were fully enclosed. Both visually and physically, then, the new structure became a statement of the imperial splendor in which Calcuttans were given the opportunity to bask—and which simultaneously demanded notable changes in the physical performance of their lives.

In 1803, the year that Government House officially opened, Wellesley initiated the next part of his imperialist program, appointing a committee whose official charge was “to consider . . . the means of improving the Town of Calcutta” (Wellesley 1839). The committee duly addressed matters ranging from drainage problems to the perceived health risks inherent in the “native” manner of building (typically insubstantial and poorly drained). But the general principles that guided Wellesley’s thinking were, notably, a throwback to standard neoclassical canons of design, namely “order, symmetry, and magnificence.” Thus even more broadly than had been realized in the resolutely neoclassical Government House, Wellesley’s new committee was charged with emulating a paradigm of urban space synonymous with the rise of national and imperial European capitals, a paradigm that in its systematization rendered pervasive the influence of centralized authority. Seeking a manner in which “native” dwellings could thus be regulated, the Committee developed a scheme that clearly fulfilled the charges of order and symmetry, if perhaps not magnificence. Houses were to be aligned in a series of parallel double rows, running east-west for 150 to 200 feet. These would be inserted in an orthogonal matrix of new “great roads” running north-south and east-west, which in addition to providing order and regularity would ostensibly facilitate better communication, better circulation of air, and improved drainage.

This pattern of rectilinear broad avenues, if executed, certainly would have heightened the sense of imperial splendor, if only by bringing a systematic (albeit banal) apparatus of European order to

![Figure 7. James Fraser, “Government House.” Views of Calcutta and Its Environs, 1824–26.](image)
a space formerly laid out in terms comprehensible only to indigenes. It also would have introduced new means of control and identification and, more insidiously, social atomization—replacing tight-knit, well-surveilled neighborhoods with open, fluid street corridors, excellent conduits for commerce, but poor locales for community. As such the Committee’s plan would have undermined a broad range of indigenous social practices, which had sustained relations of family, caste, trade, and neighborhood, but to which rules of geometry and hygiene were inimical. Given Wellesley’s desire to tighten political control over the indigenous population, a spatial apparatus such as the Committee proposed would have been particularly well suited to his ends.

Wellesley and his Committee sought to spearhead rearticulation of the city as an imperial stage-setting in which to proclaim the installation and propagation of empire. The keynote of that effort was the grandiose Government House, and complementar­ity efforts by artists, writers, and builders of private mansions helped to advance and sustain it. Even at the opening of the nineteenth century the vision that central Calcutta first presented to every arriving ship passenger was of a central greensward flanking the river and surrounded by grand buildings of palatial scale, shimmering white in the tropical sun. Little poetic license was required for Lord Valentia, beholding this vision during a brief visit to Calcutta in 1803, to call it “an entire village of palaces, . . . the finest view I ever beheld in a city,” a notion seconded in 1824 by James Atkinson’s book-length poem titled “City of Palaces” (Mountmorris 1809; Atkinson 1824), a notion romanticized as well in an 1828 Arcadian vision painted by Chinnery (figure 9). The green Esplanade and its encircling palaces had enormous representational value as the glittering proscenium of empire. But as in most theatrical productions the value lay not only in the show but also in what the proscenium obscured. For while this ensemble proclaimed the majesty, wealth, and authority
of a European capital, it also screened vision of any indigenous counterstatements. The end result was that the first experience of the city, for Indians and Europeans alike, was framed quite simply in a concerted show of imperial power, assets, and authority. Plans for rationalizing the interior of the city such as Wellesley's Committee had proposed were not yet realized. But the architectural and spatial rhetoric of Government House and adjacent "palaces" nevertheless articulated a stately hierarchy that effectively subordinated the interior and the indigenous to the European and the imperial.

Planning for Public Health

The first global epidemic of cholera originated in Calcutta in 1817. Within months of the outbreak, a quasi-official committee was constituted to recommend ways in which proceeds from an existing public lottery could be used for physical improvements to the city. To understand the rationale for the Lottery Committee's recommendations, it is necessary to recognize the prevailing comprehension of the processes by which disease spread. Very few diseases were thought to be actually contagious in the modern sense, that is, transmitted by means of a specific pathogenic organism. More common were diseases such as cholera and malaria, termed "non-contagious," which were thought to be occasioned by the effects of environmental conditions on the human metabolism. Malaria, for example, was thought to be precipitated by emanations (mal-aria) from decomposing animal and

Figure 9. George Chinnery, view across Calcutta Maiden toward Government House, after 1828. Victoria Memorial, Calcutta.
vegetable matter or from low marshy ground and stagnant pools. Such emanations, or "miasmata," were construed to be the "exciting cause" that somehow triggered sickness in the individual. Swamps and other sources of degenerative vapors (sources that of course bred mosquitoes and infectious bacteria too) were identified as agents of disease. Not surprisingly, those living close to such places also were the poorest. Moral conditions ostensibly tied to poverty—laziness, depravity, etc.—were not yet ordinarily tied to the incidence of disease, nor were racial differences. Rather, disease was understood to be engendered by deficiency in the air, exposure to which could occur either at the site of its production or through aerial transmission.

Managing the physical environment so as to minimize such "exciting causes" of disease thus became an urgent concern of those worried not only about the economic health of the city but also about their own personal health. Proposed remedies included drainage, more stringent controls on the indigenous population's manner of living, and generally increasing ventilation throughout the city. Implementing such measures was rapidly understood as crucial to the sustainability of the British economic, political, and military presence in India. Thus at a very early meeting the Committee placed a high priority on intervention to safeguard the public health. It would undertake the filling, deepening, and cleaning of "tanks" (reservoirs), reduce the accumulation of "filth" through construction of new drains and sewers, and promote ventilation by cutting down trees and building new roads which, running in a straight north-south line, would facilitate passage of the prevailing winds (Lottery Committee, 18 December 1817).

But the Committee still remained uncertain whether large-scale efforts to improve ventilation and drainage would be efficacious. J. Jameson, Secretary to the Medical Board, investigated one area of crowded huts, surrounded by poorly-drained land, accumulations of filth, and shallow and foul tanks. He concluded that despite the proximity of this area to houses of the European elite,
the only effect on the latter was visual and olfactory displeasure. Over a period of several years none of the families living north or south of the problem area could be shown to have contracted any disease that could be “ascribed to the foul state of the neighbourhood” (Lottery Committee, 20 July 1820). Such observations, of course, threw considerable doubt on whether a medical rationale could justify intervention in areas of European habitation. But North Calcutta, the overwhelmingly Indian portion of the city, still was seen as ripe for intervention. By one estimate, two thirds of the Indian population was afflicted with some manner of disease—and that was evidence enough to warrant extensive changes to the urban landscape, based on the same medical rationale that was apparently inapplicable in European areas of the city.

G. J. Gordon, another member of the committee, in suggesting a comprehensive scheme for diminishing disease in North Calcutta, focused almost exclusively on the problem of ventilation. He argued that for cholera as well as a host of other diseases, the key to the incidence and intensity of disease was the degree to which the air was corrupted: Not only the prophylactic, but also the antidote, was fresh air. The European residential area of South Calcutta (shaded area to the far right in figure 10) already had been laid out in a pattern of generally rectilinear streets, forming broad open corridors that facilitated the circulation of air as well as traffic. For the portion of the city inhabited by the Indian population, however, Gordon proposed a far more severe street arrangement (Lottery Committee, 3 February 1820). In a pattern reminiscent of Wellesley’s Improvement Committee’s unexecuted proposal for orthogonal “great roads,” he recommended a set of nine parallel north-south streets, each 70 feet wide and 515 feet apart, all extending northward from Bow Bazar, a major commercial area (indicated by parallel lines marked in figure 10). Gordon further proposed subdivision of the resulting large strips of land in between these streets into regimented single rows of huts, aligned east-west.

Much of this work was to be financed by a value-increment method, prefiguring a similar process used by Haussmann a generation later in Paris and common globally today: Land would be purchased relatively cheaply before improvement by the governmental authority, and then resold at much higher prices thereafter. The Lottery Committee’s proposals followed in the tradition of Parliament-sanctioned municipal “Improvement” projects in England and Ireland dating from the mid-eighteenth century, which generally involved the widening of a few existing streets
and/or cutting a few new streets, in order to alleviate congestion or improve the aesthetics of vistas focusing on prominent sites or buildings (McParland 1972; McCullough 1991; Spencer 1911). The proposals for Calcutta moved beyond these precedents in two broad respects: First, they sought to remake an extensive portion of the city according to a single, systematic design; second, and perhaps more significant, the circumstances of intervention were radically different, most notably because of the concern over disease. Up to this point in England intervention for purposes of urban disease control had focused on individual households, not on the city fabric in general (Jordanova 1979; Keith-Lucas 1954; Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor 1805). Well in advance of Edwin Chadwick and other English sanitary reformers, the authorities in Calcutta determined that unhealthy conditions warranted wholesale and large-scale reconfiguration of Calcutta’s urban space.

Of the entire scheme only two streets were completed during the tenure of the Lottery Committee, one being the Wellesley-Wellington-College-Cornwallis Street corridor, and the other being Amherst Street further east (the two corridors indicated by darker shading in figure 11). For in the case of Gordon’s scheme, as with many other Lottery Committee “improvement” projects, much of the indigenous population, particularly those with a stake in the existing fabric that was targeted by the Lottery Committee, saw fit to resist and subvert the Committee’s plans. The Committee’s minutes are replete with instances of projects that were stalled, scaled back, compromised, or abandoned due to the resistance of merchants, building owners, and others whose interests would be harmed—or annihilated—by the Committee’s plans. In most cases the minutes suggest that the affected parties
were holding out for compensation that the Committee felt was excessive, unaffordable, or simply extortionate. Since the Committee had no power of eminent domain, its plans were effectively frustrated by the noncompliance of those who stood in its way. But an alternative reading of their demands also allows us to understand that holding out for high compensation was a testament to the value of the existing configuration of the urban fabric. Perhaps it was inefficient and even unhealthy by British standards, yet it was still comfortable, functional, profitable, and congenial to those who lived in it and made their livelihoods by it. To demand high compensation was, as many of their recorded arguments attest, an indication of the fitness and viability of the indigenous urban fabric.

Had Gordon’s plan been executed more fully, the result would have been a wholesale disruption of virtually every aspect of the manner in which people in this portion of the city lived, worked, traded, worshiped, and socialized with each other. But this would have been cause for little if any worry to Grant and the other Commissioners. According to early nineteenth-century medical practice, intervention was undertaken not to cure a pathology but rather to create conditions inhospitable to pathology. Narrow lanes, winding alleys, and traditional living and working spaces were seen not simply as old-fashioned but also as detrimental to the health of the population at large. Instead, the goal was to produce a sanitary/commercial/administrative space that was uniform, predictable, and manageable. To do so meant more than ignoring the complexities of indigenous life, more than sanctioning indigenous practices under the rubric of a “dual city.” It required their active suppression. Put differently, urban space would be transformed into a medium for sustenance of the colonial power through its regimes of economy, hygiene, and control. Just as adamantly, however, indigenous landowners and businessmen rejected these changes in favor of existing regimes of caste, occupation, family, gender, religion, and neighborhood.

Populace as Pathogen:
Excising Corrupt, Vitiating Practices

By 1836, INCREASING CONCERN OVER the state of public health led the Government to establish a new committee that would oversee establishment of a Fever Hospital, as well
as look more comprehensively into the state of drainage, health, and hygiene throughout the city.

With this Fever Hospital Committee came a radical shift in the understanding of the relation between the city and the hygiene of its population. The Lottery Committee had construed the urban fabric as a material apparatus that served the hygiene interests of its inhabitants in certain beneficial or adverse ways. The customs and practices of the population were virtually unmentioned, and remained a neutral issue. But for Surgeon James Ranald Martin, a principal force behind the Fever Hospital Committee, the production and transmission of disease was attributable to the backward culture and moral immaturity of the indigenous population. In their benighted state, he argued, they were unable to see how physical "cleanliness" and "moral purity" were inextricably related (Martin 1837:24).6

Ignoring the very deep concern for cleanliness in many different dimensions of daily secular and spiritual practice embedded in the caste system, Martin roundly condemned caste as "an enormous injury to public health," and cited numerous examples of other indigenous customs that contributed to the poor state of public health (Martin 1837:49–53). One could only conclude that any attempt to improve public health simply by attending to the physical fabric of the city was pointless. Until the people shed their backward beliefs and customs, the city could not be rendered sanitary. So instead of an understanding of the urban fabric as an instrument for the attenuation of environmental pathology, the paradigm shifted to appropriation of that fabric as a means to the moral and cultural reform of a distinct racial segment of the population.
The Committee as a whole was as pessimistic as Martin, summarily condemning "the parts of the City inhabited by the Natives" as "inconsistent with moral improvement, and political prosperity" (Fever Hospital Committee 1838–1841:16–17). The Committee undertook a corresponding shift in the management of urban space—toward promoting "moral improvement and political prosperity"—by initiating a new program of regulations and physical improvements.

One plan that received considerable favorable attention was prepared by Captain H. N. Forbes (figure 12). He proposed to construct a canal, running from the Chitpore Bridge at the northern tip of the city, south through the central part of the city, and then east to the Salt Water Lake. Although the principal purpose of the canal would be to provide drainage for all of North Calcutta, he also envisioned small boats using the canal to deliver goods throughout the city. No doubt with Regent's Canal and other British urban canals in mind, Forbes proposed that the canal could be widened to four or five times its ordinary width near large bazars, which in turn could induce a shift of commercial development to well-drained sites (Fever Hospital Committee 1838–1841:20–22, 24). But European paradigms rather than colonial experience clearly were behind Forbes's thinking. For while canals had been successful in urban areas of the Netherlands for centuries, and were likewise instrumental in the development of nineteenth-century London and English industrial cities, they were disastrous in tropical colonies such as Batavia, where the canal system in fact promoted the spread of disease.

The other major proposal before the Committee, prepared by Lieutenant Abercrombie, also sought to improve drainage (figure 13). Instead of a single canal, Abercrombie proposed a completely new matrix of streets, drains, and tanks to be cut through the Indian portion of the city—a web of major thoroughfares focusing on institutions and nodes of commerce that notably prefigures Haussmann's work of a similar character in Paris in the 1850s. His proposal included eight major new streets, sixty- or seventy-feet wide, that would crisscross Calcutta, connecting existing routes to each other, river ghats, and major bazars and institutions. To enhance air circulation, as well as to render a better water supply, Abercrombie proposed construction of six reservoir tanks, each as much as a million square feet and twenty feet deep (Fever Hospital Committee 1838–1841:18, 22, 28; Calcutta Commissioners 1888:23–25; Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:196–197). Ultimately the Committee urged adoption of a combination of the
two plans (Fever Hospital Committee 1838–1841:27). Only a very
minimal portion of it was implemented over the next several
decades, but it remained a principal planning blueprint for the city
for over half a century, and several of today’s principal thorough-
fares through North Calcutta were in fact prefigured by this plan.7

As the Fever Committee sought ways to promote hygiene
through physical improvements, they also came to
approach the new infrastruc-
ture as an instru-
ment for reform-
ing indigenous peoples’ habits
and customs—
and ultimately construed that
task as making the city an appar-
ratus of racial
differentiation and
control. Implicitly the C o m m i t t e e
argued that the role of the urban fabric in sustaining human wel-
fare necessarily had to account for specific racial characteristics,
particularly those of Europeans:

If India is to be governed by Englishmen, it should seem
a matter of great political importance to render the seat
of its government a place where Englishmen, having
the usual constitutions of their race, can live in the full
possession of their faculties, and their vigour. [Fever
Hospital Committee 1838–1841:62]

As part of this process of understanding the relations between
urban structure and social practices, the Committee undertook
interviews of selected prominent figures from North Calcutta,
seeking in particular their impressions of the reasons for and
sources of disease in that part of the city. But the very choice of
respondents actually predisposed the inquiry toward findings with
a clear anti-Indian bias. Most of those asked were evidently fairly
prosperous, often having an interest in a bazar or in other real
estate holdings in their neighborhood. Thus each, of course, had a stake in cooperating with the inquiry. Not only would they want to please those in charge of regulating their activities, but also they would want to support initiatives that could enhance their profits. In testimony of 1837 before the Fever Hospital Committee, for example, Bishop Mottyoll of Bow Bazar supported the straightening of certain streets, readily admitting that “I shall derive some personal benefit” from improvements to at least one street alongside which he owned land (Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:17). Furthermore, as some of the wealthiest figures in the Indian community, having profited already from the trading environment maintained by the British, many can be presumed to be among those most comfortable with Western ways of thinking. And finally, as elites with a measure of prestige and status to preserve, it would not be against their interest to disparage certain portions of the population below themselves. Each respondent was asked to reply to a set of twenty-six specific questions. Some were primarily empirical, asking about the state of the drains, tanks, and drinking water. Others, however, steered the respondent toward embedded value judgments. For example, question 13 asked:

Are the Huts and Houses of the Native Inhabitants, sufficiently separated, and apart, to admit of free ventilation, or are they in dense masses? In the latter case would there be any difficulty experienced in opening them out, or in making Streets, and Lanes, for that purpose? [Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:2]

This, as well as subsequent questions—about “ruinous” houses that might be “receptacles of filth,” the removal of filth from “Native Houses,” which mode of building “the Natives” would find most conducive to health, and “Native habits which you consider injurious to health”—readily predisposed respondents to provide disparaging remarks about “the Natives,” a class or group against whom respondents were cast as a sort of elevated intermediaries (Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:2–3). The Committee thus was able to reap what it had sown: condemnatory descriptions of certain “Native habits” and of certain pockets of “Native” houses that in materials or configuration were conducive to vitiation of the environment and to disease—and thus were a threat to the neighborhood and city at large. The Committee left unexamined such matters as who was responsible for the inadequate size and crowding of huts (tenant? landlord?), how people living in such insalubrious huts could be expected to afford anything more “san-
itary,” and the degree to which objectionable modes of building and personal habits were simply adapted from practices followed in rural villages and not evidence of recalcitrance, sloth, or vice. Respondents also obliged the Committee by disparaging such native habits as their “mode of living” in general, their caste-wise “scruples as to the purity and impurity of a thing,” “the irregularity of time in which the Natives in general take their meals,” their propensity for “keeping up at nights on occasions of public as well as private entertainments” as well as their “habit of sleeping in the day for hours,” their “indolence, want of exercise and uncleanness,” “bathing in the River during the cold weather,” “committing public nuisances in different parts of the Lane,” and even “the mode of clothing among the poorer classes” (Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:7, 8, 10, 14, 15, 18, 24, 27, 29, 38, 43, 45).

Given that fresh, moving air was seen to be prophylactic as well as antidotal, even in the vicinity of miasmatic, badly drained areas, the flow of air became a matter of particular concern. Worried respondents reported that indigenous huts generally were built in such “dense masses, and so close to each other, that they invariably prevent the free circulation of air,” the underlying understanding being that such was an invitation to disease. In retrospect, it is clear that there were multiple reasons for such crowding: the expense of ground rent, traditional village patterns of building in which separate but contiguous structures were arranged to form family compounds, and the particular desirability of land close to sources of good water or other amenities (Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:5, 7, 10, 13, 17, 22, 29, 37).

Implicitly the Committee and their respondents recognized the futility of legislatively building techniques that inhabitants neither desired nor could afford. Instead, the remedy that almost all parties preferred was to carve straight new avenues through the worst such areas. In testimony to the Fever Hospital Committee, Raja Kalikrishna Bahadur of Shoba Bazar offered the standard litany of benefits that such thoroughfares would provide: They “would no doubt tend to promote commerce, and afford freer communication, and thereby augment the value of Property; at the same time, . . . they would embellish and better ventilate the Town and Northern Suburbs.” Surgeon James Ranald Martin offered two more: “free exposure to the sun, to rarefy and elevate the vapours—and to the winds, to dilute and dissipate them” (Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:11; Fever Hospital Committee 1838–1841:10).
Much of the problem, of course, was due to the incongruities that existed between the city’s mercantile-extractive purpose for being where it was, the low-lying and often waterlogged terrain on which it was sited, traditional village-building practices that Bengalis employed in Indian portions of the city, and British notions of cities as instruments of trade, authority, empire, and hygiene. The results were predictably disastrous. Traditional modes of building, entirely functional on elevated ground in a village of modest population, were not well adapted to the high densities and poor drainage of the city. Mat and thatch construction—which the Committee acknowledged to be the most comfortable and salubrious for the inhabitants—abetted the rapid spread and high mortality of fire in areas of dense building. As for dwellings of mud construction, Abercrombie observed in 1837 that in most cases it was so insubstantial that walls were easily penetrated by water, “which after a few showers of rain occasions their fall.” The walls often would collapse into public streets and drains—as many as twenty instances in one day had been noted—blocking the drainage of water and sewage and thus flooding whole districts (Fever Hospital Committee 1838a:91). Moreover, high building densities over wide areas produced higher volumes of waste and runoff than could be handled by the narrow passages between structures or by the flat, poorly-drained terrain.

But in viewing the problem as centered in Indian building practices rather than in the incompatibility between economy and environment, the only solution that the Committee could recommend was to legislate against custom—“to prohibit the erection of straw roofed or matted huts within the limits of Calcutta.” Declaring that “fires have almost in every instance originated in straw huts with mat walls,” the committee laid blame not so much on the materials as on the customs of the inhabitants, specifically “the extreme carelessness of the lower classes with regard to fire, and their habit of cooking in immediate contact with the inflammable walls of their dwellings” (Fever Hospital Committee 1839:29). Likewise the Committee’s plan to alleviate the spread of disease, which proposed extensive construction of new water supplies and drains, was predicated on substantial changes in practices of the indigenous residents. Most dramatic, perhaps, despite the construction of many new tanks, was the suggestion that many of those who were accustomed to bathing and washing clothes in existing tanks close to their dwellings would have been expected to carry their laundry far away, possibly “out of town,” to other
tanks specifically designated only for clothes washing (Chuckerbutty 1854 1:49–50; see too Fever Hospital Committee 1838b:37).

The paradigm thus adopted by the Fever Hospital Committee in its efforts to address a host of urban ills was to pathologize multiple segments of the population—those who lived in certain places, built in a certain way, indulged in certain habits—in effect to construe them as lesions in the tissue of the city, lesions that needed to be excised and replaced with more hygienic buildings and people.

Such zeal to “sanitize” the city through elaborate systems of streets, drains, and canals, while banning traditional modes of building and suppressing many traditional patterns of daily activity, all disclose an ever-increasing horror with which the British viewed the indigenous population as alien to this “Second City of Empire.” The physical measures that the British proposed as “improvements,” measures that would conduce to certain kinds of “safer,” more “benign” practices among the Indian population, were means by which the British sought to transform not just the city but also its population into a “cleaner,” better regulated, less threatening populace, both medically and politically—concerns that continue to the present day (cf. Chakrabarty 1991).

Conclusions

FOLLOWING THE SUDDEN ASCENDANCY OF British authority in Bengal after the Battle of Plassey, Clive had hoped for the success of a “dual government,” under which indigenous production and British trade might exist in close synchrony, while their respective cultures could follow their own customs and traditions. But it soon became clear that this was unworkable from a number of perspectives, ranging from mundane questions of property ownership to English imperial ambitions. The conceptual division of the city into a “White Town” and a “Black Town,” nominally in accord with Clive’s dual vision, served increasingly to suggest instead domains of difference in which to seek the basis for intervention—first in terms of physical characteristics of the material fabric of the city, and then in terms of social and personal characteristics of the population—and on which to impose regimes of improvement, both cooperative and compulsory.
Nevertheless whatever plan or process the British sought to impose, it ultimately would fail without considerable compliance on the part of the indigenous community. Indeed this propensity to failure was almost a necessary consequence of the particular characteristics of the British colonial environment. Loath to implement full-scale bureaucratic control of India prior to the Mutiny in 1857, the East India Company instead relied on indigenous structures of commerce, law, property, and so forth. As a consequence, whenever the British sought to intervene in these local structures, particularly with schemes to build streets, canals, drains, reservoirs, and such, they initiated a process of negotiation in which the indigenous parties retained considerable standing. The records of the Lottery Committee and the Fever Hospital Committee are replete with the frustrations encountered in dealing with property owners whose dwellings, markets, or warehouses the Commissioners wanted to raze or reconstruct. Since the British were unable to execute powers of eminent domain for purpose of these improvements, even complaints over blocked access to homes and businesses during sewer construction vexed officials and considerably slowed progress.

A Foucauldian analysis of the wide corridor-streets, open spaces, canals, and other improvements proposed by Wellesley and the Lottery and Fever Committees would construe them as technologies of surveillance and control, imposed to enhance the hegemony of the colonial power. And there is considerable truth to such an approach, although the truth resides as much in the veils and silences of indigenous culture that such improvements would have sundered—veils and silences crucial to such practices as caste and purdah, and sustained by the complex layers of city fabric that the British now sought to discipline. But the historical record shows that the deployment of power (as Foucault would have put it), while considerable, was not entirely one-sided. Certainly the proposed changes, while substantial, would have involved considerable intrusion and disruption in indigenous portions of the city, sundering and exposing communities, and regimenting residences and workplaces according to unfamiliar regimes. And in affording an ostensible orderliness to the city plan, these projects would have served just as surely to obliterate the complex articulation of locales that had made Calcutta such a thriving city by the early nineteenth century. But in successfully contesting and resisting many improvement projects, indigenous Calcuttans negotiated the ongoing growth of the city on their terms.
This was not a clash of two imperial powers vying to define the terms in which the city would be recast in the image of one dominant culture or another. Rather, it was a contest between two very unlike discourses. One was metropolitan, focusing on hygiene, systematization of infrastructure, and circulation as necessary to accommodate the changing demands of global trade. The other was a discourse of locale, articulating and protecting structures of caste, occupation, family, gender, religion, and neighborhood. And while the terms in which these discourses were cast were not especially amenable to each other, it is also true that both sides ended up yielding some ground in the negotiations. Many of the British projects were abandoned, scaled back, or only partially completed. On the other hand new sewers and streets eventually were put through, in part because the city had far outgrown the scale of a Bengali village and, in light of the population density that global trade now sustained, a higher caliber of sanitary and transportation infrastructure became essential for Bengalis as well as the British.

And there were subtler changes as well, in many cases involving shifts in Bengali practices and customs towards British convention. For the Committees' records show that the British primarily entertained complaints and challenges from those who, in their eyes, had standing. Ordinarily this meant those whose property or trade would be affected by the improvements in question. Thus the British took seriously the claims of entrepreneurs who faced displacement or disruption, and acknowledged their efforts to hold out for suitable compensation. Those who feared loss of traditional neighborhoods (paras) or markets, on the other hand, had in the eyes of the British no sufficient ground on which to object to improvement plans. Thus in the end what indigenous compliance there was also involved indigenous change, since the very process strengthened the standing of certain strata of the indigenous culture—property owners, merchants, etc.—whose interests, businesses, and lifestyles were most congruent with the British.

This change occurred not only with respect to the standing of Bengalis in the eyes of the British, but also relative to their own indigenous community. It materialized most explicitly in the form of new residential quarters (figures 3, 4) characterized by grand mansions in westernized architectural styles that often accommodated Western visitors with spatial layouts and room decorations that, to an extent, suited Western expectations. Stylistically, spatially, and socially these new bourgeois locales melded characteris-
tics of British practices into the culture of newly evolving Bengali strata. Many Bengalis simultaneously took advantage of the parallel opportunity to distance themselves in a literal, material fashion from the limits of traditional Bengali practices (e.g., the limits of caste and status) without abandoning them altogether (e.g., by retaining interior spatial divisions in accord with requirements of purdah for gender separation). Urban space thus afforded a medium in which the complex, often incongruent, strands of indigenous tradition, colonial intervention, local resistance, and social transformation intersected in constantly evolving processes of negotiation. And the outcomes of these processes continually became re-embedded as the prevailing discourses of the material fabric that articulated the social, political, and cultural frameworks of the city.

Notes

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1 Although I would not want to over-emphasize a simplistic view of cities purely as economic instruments, it may be helpful to paraphrase Marx: Cities, like capitalism, constantly need to reinvent the means of production. This is necessary in order to maintain their ability to profit and grow, and so to sustain and advance the interests of those who are in possession and control. Urban history therefore can easily become a chronicle of such reinventions. For a contrasting approach to urban history that addresses the relation between city and "nature" in a more wholistic fashion, see Cronon 1991.

2 The term tola is used to designate a portion of a village or town, usually with the understanding that it is inhabited by people of a particular occupation, e.g., Beniatola, the locale of the spice merchants. The term para, derived from Sanskrit, literally designates "part of a village," or sometimes a cluster of houses situated at a little distance from the village. The attendant connotation is that the part or group is defined according to some common interest or characteristic. Para is distinct from the term mohalla, which refers to a larger entity, often administratively defined,
such as a division, quarter, or ward. It is said that in a para “you know the neighbors.” In the 1930s, Calcutta is said to have consisted of about 100 paras, each bound together by “the feeling of pride and unity and a sense of the ‘territoriality’ of its inhabitants” (Gupta 1990–1991:215).

3 I do not mean to imply that the Company articulated a spatial schema in the manner of a modern zoning plan (though I would agree that the mechanical parcelization of functions in modern zoning certainly is prefigured throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century urbanism, colonial and otherwise). Rather, I am arguing that the manner in which the British (and, for that matter, Indians) articulated space in Calcutta was both a consequence and an instrument of their economic, political, social, and ideological interests. As such, those articulations of space likely appeared “natural” or “self-evident” to the people who directed the laying of streets and erection of buildings, without resort to a formal and explicit schema in mind.

4 Following the committee report of June 1804 just discussed, two subcommittees issued additional reports recommending menus of far less systematic improvements. One subcommittee addressed problem areas within the city, and recommended: changing the slope of two bridges; closing three burial grounds; repairing the monument to the Black Hole; placing benches and chairs around the tank in Tank Square; clearing away the ruins of the Old Fort; clearing huts, sheds, and godowns, and cutting off a street corner, to help improve circulation; banning straw-roofed houses from one bazar and totally closing another; cleaning “brick, rubbish, timbers and old guns” from the Esplanade, and repairing ditches along its northeast boundary. The other subcommittee focused on problems in the city’s environs, and its recommendations consisted almost entirely of making and improving roads across the southern suburbs of the city, from Garden Reach to Ballygunge—not incidentally, the area in which most of the British elite built their “garden,” or country, houses (Chatterji 1951:14–15).

5 By the 1780s, disciples of William Cullen were generally agreed that typhus fever was a general, constitutional disease for which undernutrition and anxiety were predisposing causes; rebreathing expired air was the principal exciting cause, but close confinement could do this as well (Pickstone 1992). That a disease had its social causes was beginning to be recognized, but this did not yet imply a set of social remedies.

6 See too Lord Auckland’s expressed goal of “improving such habits amongst the people as are most injurious to health” (Fever Hospital Committee 1839:6).

7 Beadon Street, Grey Street, and Upper Strand Road were completed. No tanks were excavated between 1836 and 1856. Only two or three were completed between 1856 and 1863. And no new tanks were excavated from 1863 through the end of the century (Goode 1916:239, 344). Abercrombie’s plan was introduced as a worthy object of attention half a century after he proposed it (Calcutta Commissioners 1888:23–25).
But his proposals were formally abandoned within a year because the cost of realizing them had become prohibitive (Goode 1916:239).

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Sreemani, Soumitra

Stokes, Eric

Thankappan Nair, P.

Wellesley, Richard and Marquess Colley