

***bhoot bangla*: building stories and unplanning interiors in a bengali industrial town**

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abstract

This essay explores the unplanning of interiors and the stories we tell about them. The interiors it examines occupy buildings that were originally planned under the British Raj for Asansol, a colonial/industrial town in West Bengal, India, but when empire and industry departed, the people who had been there all along moved into the vacuum left behind and became masters of the buildings they had served. With no formal titles to the properties and with eviction an ever-present possibility, they have, over decades, unplanned these interiors. Subdivided, repurposed, and ruined, their occupants unable to take full possession, unable ever to leave, these interiors have become *bhoot bangla*, which means, in Bengali, both ruined houses and haunted ones. Even their histories are ghostly and, in the absence of formal records, there are only stories to go on. How might we gather and evaluate those stories, and how can we — should we, given the precarious circumstances — retell them?

Drawing on structuralist understandings of story, and following the architectural theorist Sophia Psarra, this essay uses spatial thinking to construct 'building stories' that imagine, and thereby re-member, the buildings they story. At the same time, it explores how building stories can be themselves unplanned: on the one hand to reflect the (un)structures they story, on the other, to invite unpredictable adaptations, occupations, and hauntings of their own. It goes on to explore how these processes of unplanning can be generated and documented through practices of collaborative drawing, influenced by the work of illustrators such as the Glaswegian ethnographer Mitch Miller. The essay contributes new thinking to the practices of writing and drawing about architecture and place by considering how interiors, and the buildings they occupy, can be understood, and represented, as open, relational works.

keywords

drawing; creative writing; post-colonial; domestic; structuralism

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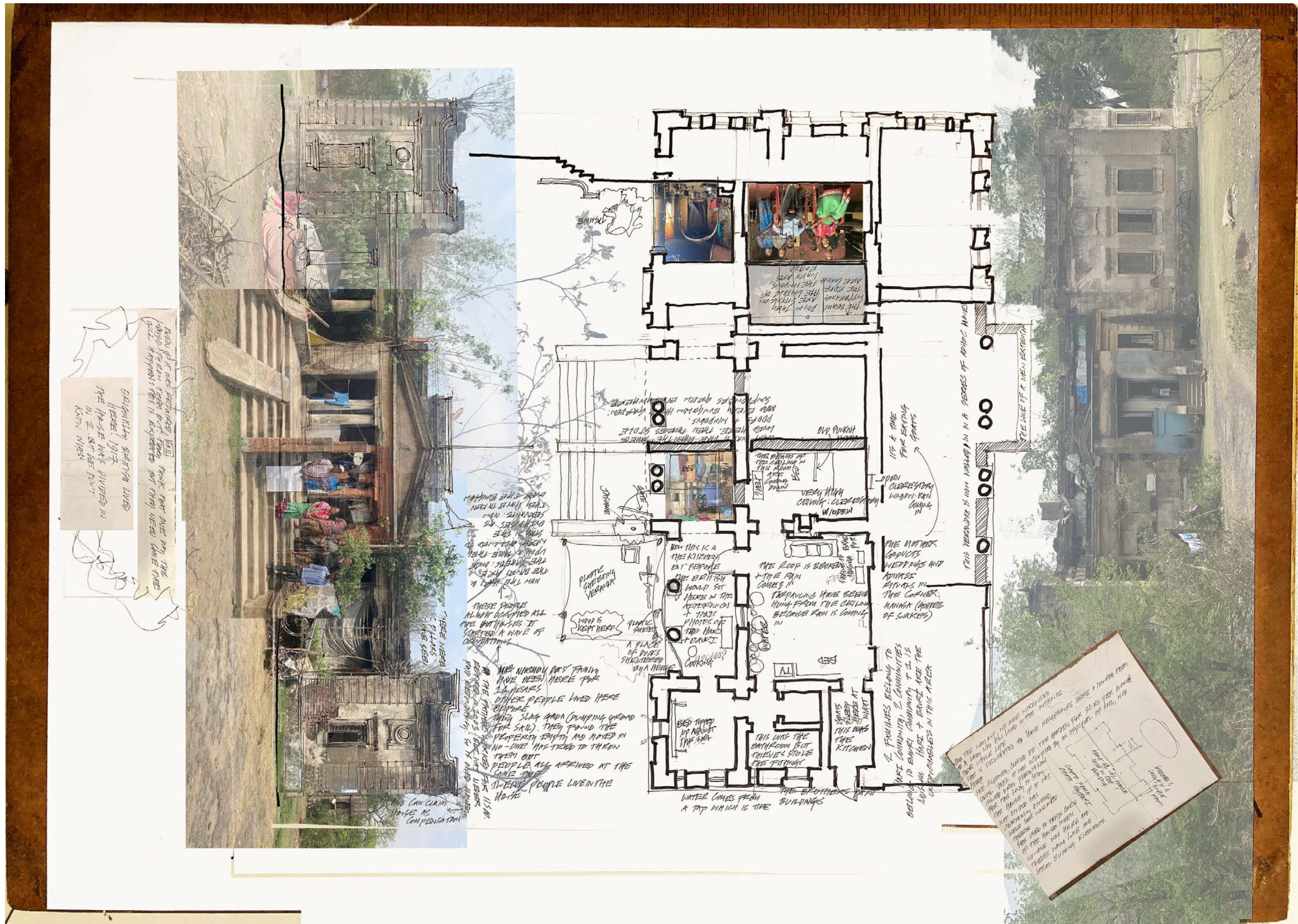


Figure 01.
Bhoot Bangla. Illustration: Edward Hollis, 2025.

first story: bhoot bangla

It's a *bhoot bangla*, they say, a haunted house, but it seems friendly enough: the family emerge to greet us at the top of the steps.

Through the trees, there's the golf course, the club, the Freemasons' Hall, and the big house: another pedimented, Palladian affair, presiding over the management zone of one of the oldest and largest steelworks in the country.

My guide they gesture in: he is one of them. I am not. Instead, as their teenage son watches, I measure out the exterior of their little palace. It is absurdly grand.

Eventually my guide appears: he's negotiated me in.

And I realise that the little palace was, rather than is, absurdly grand.

Blocking the pedimented front door is a bed and, behind, it, a shelf stacked high with domestic detritus. Under the shelf there is a little hole — 'for the chickens in the night' they say.¹ On the floor of the verandah a kettle brews over a smouldering stove. The sheeting swathed around the columns is there, I realise, to protect the flame from wind and rain.

Within, it is pitch black. 'The old kitchen,' they say, showing me a room stacked high with firewood. 'We keep the goats here at night.' In what must once have been the dining room, they take their places on plastic chairs. In the west, a gigantic bed. In the

south, the television. In the northeast, a shrine set about with brass pots:

'Musuma' the mother tells me. 'Snake. Goddess.'

'Your home?' I ask, 'Temple! Palace!' and they point wearily up at the black plastic sheeting. 'The rain comes in,' they say. 'There's no point in replacing the windows. Not if you don't know...'

It is only as we are leaving that the old woman appears, from a cottage in the corner of the garden.

'She'll tell you,' they say. 'She knows.'

'Once Upon a Time,' she says, in Bengali, 'I worked in the house! She did the lowliest jobs, weeding the garden, sweeping floors, and cleaning the toilets.

But, one day, the master of the house announced that he was leaving. That everyone was leaving: the steel plant was leaving, shutting down, moving on. Modernising.

'You stay here,' he told her, 'and look after the place while I'm away.'

And every day she went to the house, and swept the floors and weeded the garden and cleaned the toilets. She went every day. But the master didn't come back.

In fact, as the months went by, the other masters and then rest of the workers started to leave too, and after a year or so, the only people that were left were people like her. They went on cleaning and gardening and cleaning the toilets, even though there was no one to do it for.

And then they began to realise they were, or weren't, on their own. At night, from her cottage, she'd hear noises — smashing glass, cracking timber, as if there were ghosts there. In the morning she'd find holes where there should have been windows and doors, and bathtubs and toilets prised from their housings.

'I should challenge them,' she thought, as she lay in her bed.

But she didn't dare, and after some time, the dacoits didn't even bother to wait for the darkness, and then she was really afraid. What would the officer say if he could see the place now? Who would protect her then?

And so she sent a message to the village down the road — Slag Para, it was called, the old slag heap on the edge of the old steel plant — and asked its people to come and join in the master's home.

They divided the little palace between them, and made places in the drawing rooms and colonnades for their fires and their goats and their chickens, their snake goddesses and their bicycles.

They made themselves at home, but only just. They still think the master will come back some day and that then he'll throw them out, either for having squatted in his home, or for having failed to defend it.

Until then, whenever then might be, they haunt the *bhoot bangla*: never truly living there, never leaving.

Before we leave, I ask everyone to gather on the steps for a photograph. It's hard, on the crumbling masonry, to find somewhere to stand, and no one smiles.

context one: building stories

Bhoot Bangla is a 'building story'. Composed through a process of redrafting the field notes written all over the drawing of the site that accompanied it, it narrates an interior that once upon a time was planned as part of a colonial-industrial machine and has since been unplanned, both through its precarious occupation and as a result of the shifting political and economic contexts that have produced that precarity.

The story of building three such building stories is told below. It examines storying and building as the plotting and planning of space and time: the production of what the 1930s Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin has called chronotopes: structures in literary

fiction which bring together time (*chronos*) and space (*topos*).² And it proceeds to examine how such chronotopes are, and can be, unplanned through the practice of building stories in three ways.

First, by building stories 'about' unplanned interiors, like the *bhoot bangla*, the sweet shop in the second story, and the village square in the third. All three are situated in Asansol, a place that is, itself, in the process of constant unplanning: an industrial town in West Bengal in India founded in the nineteenth century, in which the progress of colonial and post-colonial empire and industry have for two centuries repeatedly built and rebuilt, planned and unplanned their landscapes, buildings, and interiors.

Second, by demonstrating how the story of the research as also being 'about' the building of these stories. Their process of construction is narrated through three sections: one about the first encounter with the town; the second about initial collaborative efforts to narrate it; and the third about my own contribution to that collaborative effort through the media of drawing and writing.

And third, by situating these efforts within the frames of critical thinking about building and storytelling. Focusing first on the planning of stories through the construction of chronotopes, and secondly on their unplanning and their nature as open or relational work, focusing on the example of the folk tale and its retelling.

Both Buildings and Stories are planned and unplanned, designed or authored, built or published, occupied or told, and re-occupied or retold. Because of this, creative possibilities are presented by exploring the tension between these processes of ordering and disordering through the furnishing of each 'building story' through texts and drawings.

How can one reflect upon a medium through itself? Carl Klaus, the founder of the nonfiction writing programme at Iowa State University explains how segments of what he calls 'segmented texts':

can be read both as isolated units and as reverberating links to other segments; it is a 'strange reading experience, unlike that produced by any other type of prose' which produced in him 'an irresolvable tensions between two different ways of reading and responding.' [...] [which] forces him to intuitively make connections or distinctions between and among the segments. [...] these 'associative leaps' may replicate the fragmentary nature of 'recollection and reflection', but they all suggest a willingness to accept unresolved or undefined associations.³

As such, the following analysis 'segments' together three different registers of text: three building stories, three 'protocols' — accounts of the building of these stories, and three critical contexts within which that building has been practised. These registers are interspersed to engage with three broad themes: first, the analogy between buildings and stories; second, the analogy between plotting and planning; and third, the framing of strategies for unplanning (and by analogy, unplotting) stories, buildings, and interiors.

First: the terms 'building' and 'story'

building

Building is a vague word. The '-ing' implies a Teutonic origin: a material practice, rather than a classical concept like 'architecture'. The -ing also implies that 'building' is the participle of a verb: a doing, and an ongo-ing do-ing at that.

One may never know whether a building is finished. A building may be indeterminate or contingent. Buildings might be in the continuous or repeated process of un- or re-building. A building can run to ruin, inviting speculation as the human geographer Tim Edensor argues, 'about how the world might be differently ordered in accordance with looser aesthetics, less managed spaces, bodies and things, and multiple interpretable signs.'⁴

No part of a building affords this affordance more than its interiors: repeatedly refurnished and redecorated, repurposed, rearranged; pushing against, eating holes in, multiplying, subverting, the bricks and mortar that supposedly order them: unplanning the plan.

story

Story shares two syllables and a common root with the word 'history.' Both refer to the narrative relation of events, but story is a more vague and subversive term.

Writing in the 1930s *On the Art of Storytelling*, the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin comments:

Storytelling [...] does not aim to transmit the pure, intrinsic nature of the thing like information or a report. It plunges the thing into the life of the teller and draws it out again [...] Storytellers tend to begin a story with a depiction of the circumstances in which they first heard it, when they don't pass it off simply as their own experience.⁵

There is no definitive, final, or original telling of a story. There are only tellings, each of which unplans the original narrative just as surely as the endless rearrangements and re-occupations of interiors unplan the buildings they occupy. Bhoot Bangla, for example, is one such retelling of a retelling: not just a story about a building, but a story about its reoccupation. Not just that, but also a story about a visit to that reoccupied building, in which the story of reoccupation itself, as a form of building, is retold.

protocol one: an unplanned town

This research started in 2018 and remains unfinished. It is the engine and outcome of a collaboration with a small voluntary organisation: the Asansol Heritage Research Group (AHRG).

When they first email me in 2017, they have, they say, work for me. They've heard I am from Scotland, and they want me to go the National Library to find out what I can about the foundation of their town, which was planned in the nineteenth century by Scottish colonial engineers.

They can't get the information themselves, they tell me, so they have no idea what the plan was. There are, in their town, no libraries or museums or accessible archives. Any records there are, they tell me, are probably in Scotland. Their old colonial planned town is passing away, they tell me: the consequence of migration, industrial churn, toxic air pollution, byzantine property law.

And so, before it disappears, they ask me to join them, Brothers Grimm-like, in the mapping, mining, and building of oral and popular stories that might record their past, draw attention to its plight in the present, and, in doing so, help build for it a future. That process will involve writing together, designing and building a museum, and making drawings to exhibit in it: activities designed to collect, articulate, and share Asansol's building stories, and encourage others in the town to go out to find, build, and tell more.

In 2019, I travel to Asansol. The AHRG keep me to a packed schedule. Our visits are chronologically organised, they tell me, to take us from Antiquity on Monday to Independence on Saturday.

But, most of the time, it transpires, we are taking tea with the chief railway engineer and lunch in the Freemasons' Hall. We sip whisky on the roof of the Rajah's palace and I give an impromptu talk to the Rotary Club. I pose for photographs and shake hands. I become dimly aware that I am an object on display.

I wonder if I, the ostensible audience of these performances, am an obstacle to our project of finding and telling stories. But, apparently, I have my uses. I carry, without realising it, messages from the Freemasons to the Railway about who owns the Masonic Hall, from the queen mother to the crown prince about the future of the palace, from the miners to the coal board about the preservation of the village temple. This has, at times, an uncomfortable neo-colonial twist. Obtaining a meeting with the coal board, for example, is impossible for my local collaborators until I produce letters of introduction on my (British) university

weeks, and the workmen are here to start taking the building down within hours.

Time is of the essence. This is the bazaar, after all, where crows and dogs and cows and people surge in daily tides; in which, every morning, battered cabinets open, revealing mirrored interiors, watches, jewels, sweets, gold, attars, phones; in which, every evening, women scour the dust for the tiny crumbs of gold the dealers have forgotten and the cats the mud beneath the fish stalls for heads, eyes, blood.

In which shops are strung together from no more than plastic sheeting and broken furniture, just in case the municipality decide to declare them illegal and tear them down. Just like they did five years ago. And ten.

We are here to save one of them as a monument. It's hard to imagine it could be one. Every internal surface of a shop of around 2 by 4 yards is covered by glass-fronted, plywood shelving units, lined with shiny wrapping paper, stuffed with packets of biscuits and conical party hats.

But the signs declare that Messrs Bux and sons have been here since 1880. People come all the way from Bangladesh to see this shop, the current Mr Bux says: 'Kazi Nazrul Islam was only a teenager when he came to work here,' they tell me. 'He did the accounts.'

'It was only later, after he left, and joined the army, and went to prison, that he became the Rebel Poet, the Voice of Bengal, who roused the people to rebellion with his cry: "Chol! Chol! Chol!" It was only much later, that he became the national poet of Bangladesh.'

'But he used to come back here, even then, to see the place of his birth. And people still come all the way here to see where he began.'

'That's what we are trying to preserve.'

Outside, the singing continues:

'Chol! Chol! Chol!'⁷ they chant. 'Get on with it!'

'What do you show them?' I ask, and the shopkeeper laughs and points at the stool I'm sitting on.

'We tell them that he used to use it.'

'Did he?'

He laughs, but he doesn't reply: there's no time

context two: planning and building stories

On the one hand, the practice of Building Stories tells stories about buildings, like the ones you have just read about the Bhoot Bangla and the Sweet shop. On the other, it concerns the building of those stories: the distinctive ways in which their structure and form engage with their content.

How are stories planned and built?

The nineteenth-century dramaturge Gustav Freytag quotes Aristotle in saying, 'the action is the first and most important thing, the characters only second', and proceeds to prescribe how the action of any drama will, or must, follow:

if one may symbolise its arrangement by lines — a pyramidal structure. It rises from the introduction with the entrance of the existing forces to the climax, and falls from here to the catastrophe. Between these parts lie (the parts of) the rise and fall.⁸

Freytag proposes that 'storyness' is defined by structure — but what is being structured?

Not just the action or the details of the plot, but the very media in which it unfolds: space and time. As Bakhtin wrote:

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes

artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history.⁹

The term 'chronotope' (which means, literally in Greek 'time-place') draws together time and space. In the same way, Freytag's pyramid makes a spatial analogy, a diagram of 'rising' and falling action, even though there is nothing objectively 'rising' about running away, or 'falling' about coming home again. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur called 'architecture the configuration of space and narrative the configuration of time' but the idea of the chronotope suggests a synthesis between these terms of space, time, architecture and narrative.¹⁰

This synthesis has also been developed by architectural theorist Giovanni Corbellini, who writes of 'plot' as a word:

whose meanings propose various overlaps between literature and architecture, narrative and design. It defines a piece of land, a sense strictly tied to its etymological origin) as well as the course of a story, the act of tracing a drawing and the planning of intrigues.¹¹

Sophia Psarra's *Architecture and Narrative* analyses of both real buildings (the Barcelona pavilion, for example) and fictional ones (Jorge Luis Borges' Library) discovers how their spatial form relates to their narrative meaning. 'Architecture does not only express meaning,' she writes, 'it also participates in the construction of meaning through the ordering of spaces and social relationships. Architects respond to this ordering by orchestrating relations.'¹²

That is, both writers and architects plan to generate worlds, rather than merely representing them. For example, the two building stories presented so far attempt to construct a distinctive chronotopes: uncertain and precarious places and times. The expectations of grandeur presented by façade of the *Bhoot Bangla* are disappointed by its interiors; within, gnomic, unexplained explanations are

essayed and misunderstood, and the author is never quite sure whether they are welcome. In the sweet shop, there's no time, or so many layered times that that time has ravelled into a knotted ball: we are late; the crowd shout 'Chol!'; there's no time for the shopkeeper to explain; and the story is told in abrupt single lines of text. In both stories, fragmented paragraphs and unfinished sentences undermine any expectations of classical coherence, to either buildings, interiors, or stories.

The practice of building stories explores the reciprocity between building and stories through the activity of planning and building worlds in this way — and, as we shall see, unplanning them too.

protocol two: planning writing

Our first experiment in planning and building stories together involves co-authoring a chapter for an academic book.

My collaborators contribute three stories about the town. My role, I discover, is to provide the framing narrative, relating these stories to the theme of the book itself. This soon becomes an uncomfortable position. Despite my best intentions, I find myself acting as the neo-colonial interlocutor, who frames 'raw' data for academic consumption. Once we have each written our contributions I suggest we share our comments on them. I plunge in, but they say nothing about my text, despite my clumsy interventions into theirs. And so, despite my best intentions, I end up being the editor, and they the objects of my edit. And then, in an even more uncomfortable twist, so do our editors, who, ironically, ask us to write more post-colonial theory (largely written, of course, by Western academics) into the text.

The power relations will be evident, and they problematise this sort of writing: who (and therefore what) is this writing actually for?

In interview my collaborators are pragmatic. They tell me they believe that it gives them access to an

otherwise inaccessible global audience. But I'm not so sure this sort of retelling is going to help build, or rebuild, the story of their town.

planning stories

At least as we go through this dry exercise we tell one another stories. These take various forms: factual expositions, meditations, vignettes of town life, retellings of myths, WhatsApp messages, pictures.

We are not sure about what to do with them. What structure or form might we use to unlock the collective power of these collected stories?

I invite my friends to write down, on separate pieces of paper, the stories they most want to tell. As if we were playing patience, we deal these 'cards': sorting out duplications, coincidences, hierarchies, and patterns. I turn our game into a spreadsheet, whose columns represent themes of enquiry, while each cell represents a story. The AHRG respond with a diagram they call a mandala, which configures the topics as a hexagon, dividing our stories into three categories: industry, Hindu/tribal people, and 'others' (Christians, Jains/Buddhists, Muslims, and secular government).

But our diagrams do not, for the moment, generate anything more than themselves — a sort of cataloguing system. Another dimension is required to bring them to life.

(un)planning a museum

The addition of the third and fourth dimensions helps us to bind together the stories of The Unfinished Biography. In the late summer of 2020, Kazi Nazrul, the local university, offers the AHRG a space for a permanent exhibition about the heritage of Asansol: a museum. There has never been anything like Asansol before and the AHRG don't know what to do.

We start by trying to organise — to plan — the sequence of the stories we want to tell. The AHRG produce a series of interior elevations for their museum that tell the story in four thematic and

chronological chapters, one per wall: the forests of precolonial Asansol; the colonial town; the bazaar during the independence struggle; and a wall depicting the present town. I respond with a perspective sketch, spatialising the story in four dimensions as an interior that leads, anti-clockwise, from the ancient past to the future (of the past) of the town. The floor is covered with a map and, upon it, a table, furnished with diverse artefacts, makes space for discussion. One wall is kept empty for the future.

And then one day the AHRG send me a very different idea. There will be, they tell me, twenty-one pictures hung on the wall. There will be a table down the middle, upon which objects will be displayed. Juxtaposed, without explanation, on the table: a lump of coal, a brick, made by the East Indian Railway Company, and a Bengali edition of the *Ramayana*. And each image on the wall is similarly constructed: diverse images, texts, photographs, assembled apparently at random.

At first there are no captions, until the university insist. The AHRG provide twenty-one quotations from W.B. Yeats, each seemingly randomly allocated to one of the collaged images. This is no error, or omission. The AHRG explain:

those lines seem to be very general [...] which can be interesting, but a kind of context is provided to those lines when they are placed over the specific frames [...] that gives meaning to the quotes only, [and] on the other hand, the frames.¹³

They have constructed this museum, this spatialised story, not as an encyclopaedic, scientific structure of explanation, but a seemingly arbitrary collage, whose incompleteness, they say:

conjures different stories from different angles, which are all interrelated [...] so it is very difficult to just tell one story at a time because all of the stories are related to all other stories and they are all entangled.¹⁴

Setubandha, they call it: The Bridge, and it soon becomes apparent why.

As the builders are hanging the pictures on the walls and the cleaners are mopping the floor, they start to talk. They recognise places in the images, and some of the objects on the table. Encountering no explicit explanations as to their meaning, the workmen and the university staff, and then, on the opening day, the visitors, begin to speculate, to tell one another stories about what they see. They do not agree on its import, for each person makes different connections between the things they encounter. And since this collection of fragments appears to be unfinished, they offer new stories and objects to complete it. The woman who runs the canteen, for example, offers to bring in other objects from her family temple to place in the museum.

The AHRG say the museum:

is creating a space for them where they can have some listeners [...] everyone wants to tell his or her own story. Most of the time we don't have listeners, who will listen attentively carefully or listen attentively about their past experience about their grandfathers about their places.¹⁵

Setubandha, a space of incomplete knowledge, becomes not a repository, or a treasury, or even just an exhibition of stories, but the matrix of their reproduction: an invitation to build bridges.

third story: brothers retell tales

I sit on a plinth in the square of the village by the mine. The brothers of the village gather round. They have heard about Setubandha, and they want to see what we can do for them.

I start to draw.

There are two temples in the square, both dedicated to Astanayika, they tell me, an avatar of Durga. She is present here in eight avatars. All of them are also

Durga. Durga is one avatar of the Goddess.

But if there are eight goddesses, or one, or both, then why are there two temples? I ask.

And the brothers tell me the story of Jagath Ram Roy and his brothers.¹⁶

'Once upon a time, Jagathram Rai was called by the king to the court of Kashipur.'

'No,' interjects a brother. 'It was the queen who called for him — the king was sick, remember?'

'Ah yes, the king was sick. And so Jagatram stayed with the king, and fasted for many months, until the king was well again.'

'I thought he'd just been down to the river for a bath.'

'That's just what the headman thinks.'

'And he wouldn't know anything.'

'Anyway, back home, here, it was puja time: the astrologer decreed it' — the current astrologer rolls his eyes and laughs — 'and so the guardians of the temple started the ceremonies.'

'And it was just then, of course, that their brother Jagat Ram, the oldest, the holiest of them all, walked back in.'

'He was furious,' says another brother.

'No,' another corrects him. 'Juggut Rum could never, would never be furious. But he was disappointed. And so either out of embarrassment himself, or to embarrass his brothers, he built his own temple right next door. It's almost exactly the same as the original, as you can see.'

'And who was this Jagathram Roy?' I ask. 'Why did the king ask for him?'

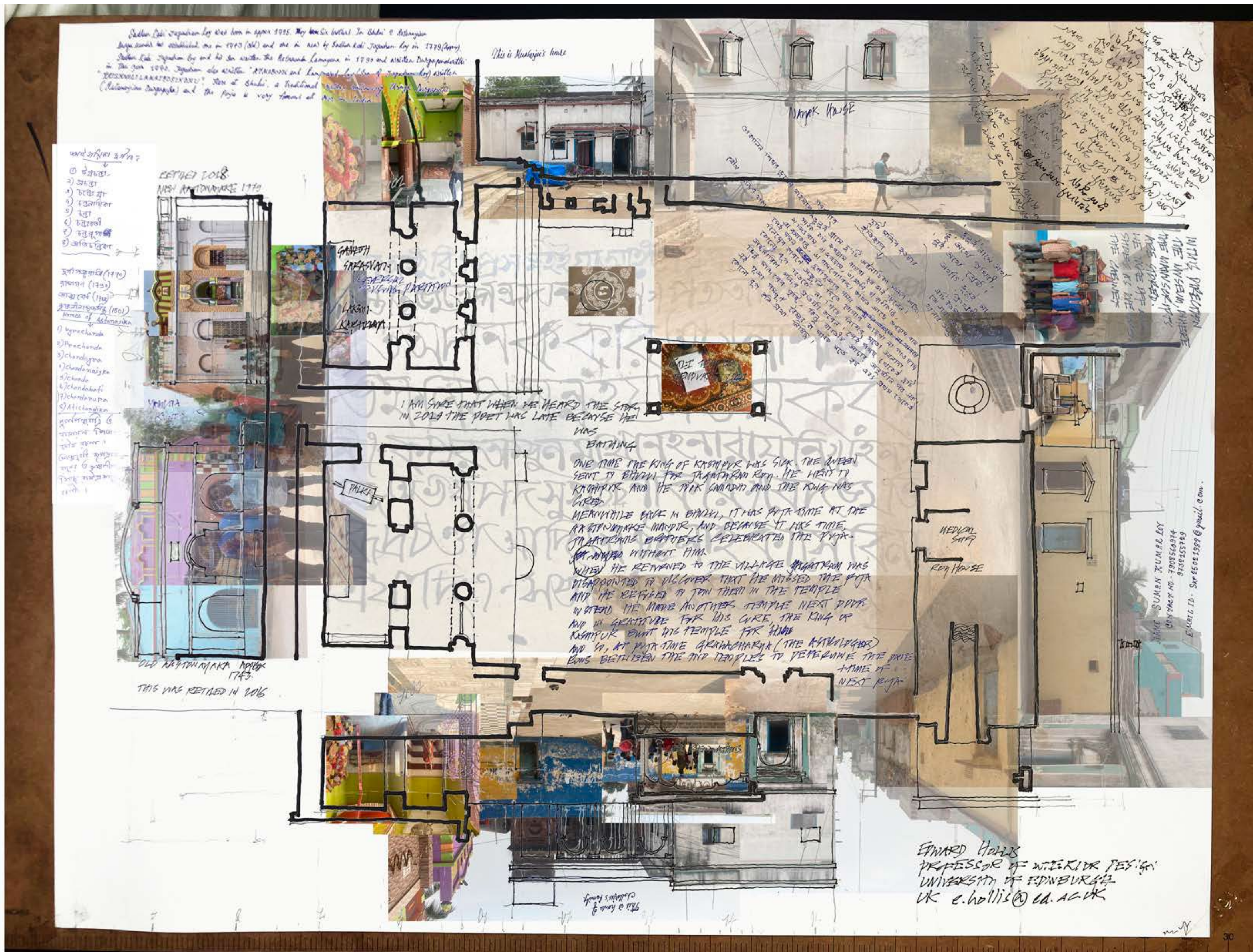


Figure 03.
Brothers tell tales. Illustration: Edward Hollis, 2025.

They look surprised.

'He was the poet, the author of the *Ramayana*, of course!'

It's not what I'd learned about the ancient epic.

'Our *Ramayana*,' explains one brother. 'He made Valmiki's epic ours: the trees and the sweets, the monkeys and mountains are our trees and sweets and monkeys and mountains. In his poem, Ayodhya is here. Rama and Sita are here. The gods are here!'

'And he wrote it in our language,' continues another. 'We'll show you,' they say. 'We have a museum of

our own, you see,' and they lead off a procession through the village.

Inside a concrete outhouse, we remove our shoes and approach a cabinet, from which the brothers remove parcels of folded newspapers, and unwrap sheafs of delicate, roughly-made paper. Upon them, written two and a half centuries ago in a large cursive Bengali hand, is the *Ramayana* of Jagathram Roy.

'We don't have it all here,' they whisper. 'Only fragments. Some of his descendants in the village won't give up the pages they inherited!'

'But we know it by heart, and every year, we sit in

his temple — the copy — and repeat it, word for word, as best we can.'

'Of course,' interjects one, 'we don't get it all right.'

And we stroll back down the lane to the two temples.

'We've restored them recently.'

So I see. In lurid, fierce, bubblegum pinks, purple, burgundy, orange mint green, and chrome yellow, glazed tiles and pink ironwork, good enough to eat.

'In keeping with tradition.'

It's not what I'd learned about tradition. But I don't think that's what they mean.

They gesture proudly at their temples, each one an imperfect avatar, a retelling of itself, each one a retelling of the other, both temples to eight avatars of an avatar of an avatar of their ancestor, who, once upon a time, made them, however imperfectly, his own retellings.

unplanning building stories

Sophia Psarra, Corbellini, and Ricoeur write of plans and plots, architecture and narrative, space and time. But this research is about building and stories, which, like the stories of the *Ramayana*, or Jagathram Roy, or his village, are always in the process of unplanning, their form and meaning uncertain and unfinished.

In *Reading Architecture*, Adam Sharr writes that while the stories that buildings tell can be read, they are not authored text: 'the presence of built fabric is too material for that analogy to stretch meaningfully' and he warns that we need to read them on their own, bricks-and mortar terms: 'the architect-authors of buildings, and critics awed by authorship, seldom offer the most reliable accounts of them.'¹⁷

After all, Sharr continues, 'Buildings have multiple

authors. The role of inhabitants in configuring and reconfiguring spaces is just as valid as the role of any professional.'¹⁸

What stories might multiply authored bricks and mortar tell and generate? What happens if we unplan, as well as plan, building stories?

In *Opera Aperta* — the Open Work — the Italian cultural theorist Umberto Eco argues that 'works' (of art, music, or literature) are traditionally understood as artefacts: singular objects, authored to express specific intentions.¹⁹ Their form transmits these intentions to the audience. But the author of an open work has chosen to leave some things open to others to decide. In the case of a Calder mobile, he writes, this may be a breath of air that rearranges the parts. In the case of a piece of music by Pierre Boulez, this may involve leaving much more of the score open to the performer (the length, or order of notes in the melody, for example) than is customary in classical performance practice, and performer and audience are engaged in creating the work. 'Every performance explains the composition but does not exhaust it,' writes Eco.²⁰

The French art critic Bourriaud's conception of 'relational aesthetics' extends the possibilities of the open work. For all its call to openness, Eco's open work is still understood as a 'work' — a score, a sculpture, an artefact created by an author, which might outlive any particular situation. Bourriaud's exploration of contemporary art practice, however, poses the artefact itself as something ephemeral:

Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by its signature or style, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations.²¹

Bourriaud writes of the implications of these 'presentations of possibilities':

it is no longer possible to regard the

contemporary work as a space to be walked through [...] It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion.²²

Open and relational conceptions of the 'work' (in this instance, let us say, a story) iterate Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope, suggesting that, in one work, there might be several chronotopes layered upon one another. Firstly, there is the chronotope internal to the work itself: the time and space generated by its own internal form and structure; but there is also a second chronotope at play: the time and space created by the story of the repeated (but shifting and distinctive) tellings or performances (unplannings) of the work over time: the story of the story, as it were.

retelling, and telling for retelling

This is an insight that has long been understood in the field of folklore studies, which engages not just with folk tales as 'works' with their own internal plots, plans, logics, and chronotopes, but also with the narration of their transmission. Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde*, for example, tells stories about stories — the evolution of Mother Goose, or Beauty and the Beast, over centuries: stories that take on their own temporal and spatial — that is, chronotopic — logic.²³

In the 1920s the English social psychologist F.C. Bartlett made an experiment to explore how stories of this sort might unplan themselves over time. He would tell his students a native American folk tale, *The War of the Ghosts*, and would ask them to retell it later.²⁴ Bartlett noted that no one was able to repeat the story perfectly, and that their retellings deteriorated in accuracy over time. That was to be expected, but what he also observed was that the parts of the story the students changed most often, and most dramatically, were those parts they did not understand: those that involved ghosts, or magic, which, in their tellings, the (twentieth century, social science) students kept trying to 'explain away.'²⁵

Bartlett concluded that lapses in memory, changes in the story, occur as we attempt to fit the diverse and unpredictable phenomena of other cultures into our own schemata, to make them comprehensible to new audiences — be they ourselves, or others.

The observation has also been taken up by cultural historians. For example, Robert Darnton writes of the actual conditions of retelling, citing how Dalmatian storytellers remember their oral tellings of *The Iliad*:

These 'singers of tales' do not possess the fabulous powers of memorization sometimes attributed to 'primitive' peoples [...] Instead, they combine stock phrases, formulas, and narrative segments in patterns improvised according to the response of their audience. [...] [the storyteller] does not conceive of repetition in the same way as a literate person [...] Texts are not rigidly fixed for him as they are for readers of the printed page. He creates his text as he goes, picking new routes through old themes.²⁶

This suggests the standardised patterns of folk story structure (such as, for example, Freytag's pyramid) are not just ways of building drama, but are also mnemonic devices. And, furthermore, that they are mnemonic devices not just for perfect reproduction, but for retelling, that, like Bartlett's students' retellings of *The War of the Ghosts*, can transform the story, again and again. Be it *The War of the Ghosts*, or the *Ramayana*, or the tale of Jagathram Roy, the folk tale — the story — can be understood as, par excellence, the open and relational work.

rebuilding stories

And so might be for buildings. Like folk tales, Buildings are retold all the time. They outlive the people who made them, the purposes for which they were made, the technologies that made them, and the cultures that thought them beautiful. Once that happens, buildings are available for re-use, and the ways in which that happens are strikingly similar to the ways

in which folk tales are retold, as a simultaneous process of preservation and transformation.

In all these instances the building remains, recognisably, a thing. Even when, like the ruins of Rome, it is buried, its form can dictate the morphology of the city built above. Even when the temple has been repainted multiple times, its original form is still visible, and the ritual and the practice purpose of the repainting remains the same. But its authorship, as well as its form, is transformed; with each new intervention, a new set of building users become not just audiences, but co-authors, performers: the re-tellers of stories.

And so buildings can operate, over time, as open works. The architects Paul Emmons and Luc Phinney write:

It has long been accepted that buildings tell stories. They do not, however, always tell the stories their original makers intend, or even understand. Buildings offer stories that frequently exceed their architects' plans.²⁷

The construction of the stories themselves, in this essay, is designed to form this very invitation to retelling. It does so through the production of drawings. *Brothers Tell Tales*, for example, begins with one.

protocol three: unplanning on paper

The stories you read here have been generated, as retellings, by the museum and the images on its walls.

Inspired by these images, I have created drawings to add to the museum's collection. Like the museum, these drawings are designed to invite retelling — not just in their final form, but through their making, too.

In this I am following the work of the Glaswegian artist Mitch Miller, whose collaboratively produced 'dialectograms' are designed to draw out the conflicts, narratives, and dialogues that are present in shared spaces.²⁸

The process of creating these images is as follows:

— I agree with the AHRG upon sites to document and the AHRG make contact with the communities who occupy these sites to obtain their consent for what we are about to do.

— At a time agreed, we arrive on the site, with an A1 drawing board and white paper, and, after a few preparatory sketches, I start to lay out a drawing of the site.

A few asides on these drawings as drawings:

— I use my body to measure the buildings, rather than a tape or laser device. This creates a sort of performance as I pace up and down, holding my arms or feet against walls or doors.

— This less precise form of measurement also means it makes more sense to draw these drawings freehand rather than hardline, making the process quicker, and easier for my audience to read.

The projections I use are designed with the following considerations in mind:

— It is important the drawings are legible from all directions when laid out horizontally. They are designed to be engaged with by a group of people standing around them — both during the process of drawing and afterwards.

— Section and elevation predominate over plan: these projections will be more recognisable to participants unversed in architectural drawing conventions.

As I draw, because I am large, white, and alien, I attract crowds of people, some of whom watch, some of whom talk to one another, and some of whom ask me questions about what I am doing.

I am not working on my own — one of my partners is also there to help translate if members of this crowd do not speak English.

I explain what I am doing, but we also ask questions — What is this building used for? When was it built? Who built it? What has happened since?

Sometimes, we write down the answers on the drawing. At other times others write them themselves.

Sometimes their answers disagree and, where I can, I record these disagreements on the drawing. This is, after all, an attempt to draw as a form of retelling.

As this process takes place over several hours, we hear the same stories again and again, elaborated, shifted, retold. Making the drawings is a way of creating this time for retelling.

Later, I collage in photographs of the buildings, to the drawings, to occupy the buildings they re-story — with the people who live in them, or who have gathered to see the drawing being drawn, and, of course the drawer himself. The drawings record not just their ostensible subject — the building — but also the process of their own making.

Once this process is complete, we print out the final image and return to give it to the people we have met there, as a gift. Another print is given to the museum. Both gifts will act, I hope, as provocations to new rounds of retelling. Indeed, they have been to be retold: just short enough, I hope, to hook a reader; each one is 'snagged' with an out-of-place detail: odd enough to suggest explanation, without providing it.

I contribute these stories to the museum as a sort of offering. In doing so, I hope to contribute, to the people of Asansol, stories as tools to help them understand how they arrived in their present and, thereby, how they might make of it their own future.

conclusion

This essay tells three stories: about the house of a colonial steel executive, squatted in by the descendants of his servants; a sweet shop that might, or might not, be a literary monument; a village square

where, once upon a time, a poet retold an old story. These stories contribute new empirical evidence about how interiors are unplanned — in this case, through the process of post-colonial change and industrial churn.

The research for these stories contributes new thinking to the practices of writing and drawing about architecture and place as a re-productive act. It describes how processes of drawing and writing have been used to unplan these stories, inviting their retelling. And to create chronotopic models of the spaces and times of these interiors.

Finally, these efforts have been situated within discourses about the relationship between building and story, using structuralist understandings of literature to understand how stories can create times and spaces, and considerations of the open work and the folk tale to think through how the plots and plans of stories and buildings can be unplotted and unplanned, opening up, in the process, new creative possibilities for stories, buildings, and interiors.

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author biography

Edward Hollis trained as an architect and is now professor of interior design at the University of Edinburgh in the UK. He is the author of several books, including *The Secret Lives of Buildings* (2009) and *The Memory Palace: A Book of Lost Interiors* (2013).

notes

- 1 All quotations in the three stories chronicled in this essay are not literal transcriptions of speech from the field work undertaken for this research. Rather, they are, in some cases, translations of Bengali speech, or re-draftings and re-presentations by the author, made from field notes taken on site that were recorded on the drawing about each story. Due to the extensive use of these quotations in each story, only the first quotation in each is cited and all others follow the same citation; Edward Hollis, field notes on drawing of visit to Bhoot Bangla, April 2023.
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