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**UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EMBODIED IMAGES IN ANALYSIS
OF GHATS OF VARANASI**

Bachelor of Architecture Research Thesis dissertation

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Approval

The following study is hereby approved as a creditable work on the subject carried out and presented in the manner, sufficiently satisfactory to warrant its acceptance as a pre-requisite towards the degree of Bachelor of Architecture for which it has been submitted.

It is to be understood that by this approval, the undersigned does not endorse or approve the statements made, opinions expressed or conclusion drawn therein, but approves the study only for the purpose for which it has been submitted and satisfies him/her to the requirements laid down in the academic program.

Thesis Title: Understanding the significance of embodied images in analysis of ghats of Varanasi

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Declaration

I, Mahek Ruparelia, 18BAR014 give an undertaking that this research thesis entitled **“Understanding the significance of embodied images in analysis of ghats of varanasi”** submitted by me, towards partial fulfilment for the Degree of Bachelor of Architecture at Institute of Architecture and Planning, Nirma University, Ahmedabad, contains no material that has been submitted or awarded for any degree or diploma in any university/school/institution to the best of my knowledge.

It is a primary work carried out by me and I give assurance that no attempt of plagiarism has been made. It contains no material that is previously published or written, except where reference has been made. I understand that in the event of any similarity found subsequently with any published work or any dissertation work elsewhere; I would be responsible.

This research thesis includes findings based on literature review, study of existing scientific papers, other research works, expert interviews, documentation, surveys, discussions and my own interpretations.

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Abstract

The different ways in which people are informed and affected by their surroundings is the phenomenon of perception. They are a collective result of multiple aspects like scale, movement, time, seasons, crowds, association, meaning. These aspects are recognized by the different senses and a spatial experience is formed, which then becomes a memorial identification of the space. These identifications vary depending on purpose of visit, frequency, gender of visitor etc. The subjective identifications create a sense of belonging of the particular user-group.

Architecture is usually studied as a discipline that articulates space and geometry, but the mental image of architecture arises significantly from its image quality that combines the various aspects and dimensions of experience into a singular, internalized and remembered entity.(Pallasmaa, J. (2011)).The most deeply existentially and experientially rooted architectural experiences impact our minds through images which are condensations(fusion of 2 or more images into a new image) of distinct architectural essences. The thesis suggests extraction of these embodied images as a method of documentation for the cultural landscape of Ghats of Varanasi. The study looked at different narratives of varying user groups that form the embodied image through observation, survey and informal conversation and artistic representations over time. The themes extracted from embodied images help in understanding of impact of association and meaning on the experience. The thesis suggests embodied images as a relevant tool for analysis of such landscapes where association, meaning play an important role.

Keywords - mental image, hapticity, association, memory, culture, meaning

INTRODUCTION:

Aim:

The aim of the thesis is to read the significance of extracting embodied images as a method in documenting spirit of place

Objectives:

- Extracting the embodied images of ghats of Varanasi by forming a conceptual framework based on the works of Juhani Pallasmaa, 2011. The memory of the experience of different usergroups will be studied to extract these images.
- Deriving the role of haptic senses in formation of embodied images by analysing the elements evoking sense of smell, sound and vision accompanying the narratives of the respondents
- Understanding relationship of spiritual and cultural meaning with these images by reading the historical, mythical and ritualistic significance.

Background and purpose of study:

The research began with an old interest in understanding the user's multisensorial experience of spaces. Beginning with Peter Zumthor's books, literature review was done to identify research gaps. The idea of analyzing experience through memory to understand the subjectivity led me to the *The Embodied Image* by Juhani Pallasmaa. Cultural landscapes like ghats have been frequently documented using measured drawing and photos but the associational and meaningful impact is not covered by these methods which is why an alternative method of studying these becomes important.

Scope and Limitation :

The study focuses on understanding the concept of embodied image and the factors influencing it. On the basis of Juhani Pallasmaa's book - *The Embodied Image* and his other works, elements that play a role in the formation of the image are extracted.

The study relies on people perception and the surveys done are during the month of March, the perceptions/images can vary as per different seasons and festivals. The study aims on testing the methodology of embodied images for documentation, it does not intend to be able to make the reader experience the image, but to convey an understanding of the image

Key terms used in Research:

Embodied Image:

In the words of Juhani Pallasmaa – “The poetic image refers to an evocative, affective and meaningful sensory experience that is layered, associative and dynamic, and in constant interaction with memory and desire. As mental frames, poetic images guide our associations, emotions, reactions, and thoughts.” They are multi sensory images of lived experiences. They are not necessarily logical or real- something that a camera can capture but are imaginary collages of fragments affected by association and meaning.

Spirit of place:

If one were to recall a cherished place, a place of past experience would come to mind. A place of value, it comes flooding with rich memories. One might remember the smells, sounds, textures and maybe the tastes of the place- maybe the distinct smell of the garden visited in childhood, or the feeling of water against feet on a sunny day or the calming hum of rain against windows. It is this intersection of the physical world with the memories and experiences that bring meaning, value and emotion to the place.

Meaning:

The meanings are the interface between the physical and psychological space of human beings. The manner in which the spaces have been occupied by various users represents their significance and the meanings they attach with them. Some significant spaces however demand a specific kind of occupancy to the existing belief systems and cultural norms for that context. They thus, become meaningful for the inhabitants.

2.

2.1 METHODS OF DOCUMENTING SPACE:

Architecture is usually analyzed and taught as a discipline that articulates space and geometry. There are multiple ways of documentation:

Photography. A building's form, and other visual characteristics can be captured in photographs, which can also be used to document changes in the building's look through time.

Drawings: When compared to images alone, drawings can convey a building's intricate details. Drawings and sketches are frequently used by architects and artists to depict the spatial characteristics of a structure, such as its dimensions, circulation patterns, and connections to the surrounding area.

Models: Realistic physical representations of buildings can provide viewers a better understanding of their shape and spatial relationships.

Written descriptions: Written descriptions can be used to record the design and construction of a structure as well as its significance in terms of politics, culture, and society.

These methods do not take into consideration factors like associations, attached meaning etc which have a huge impact on the user experience. When documenting a cultural landscape for intervention or conservation, the understanding of these intangibles - associations and meanings that allow formation of memories becomes as important as documenting the built form.

2.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF EMBODIED IMAGE:

Place has meaning, value and emotion because of the tangible (buildings, sites, landscapes, routes, objects) and intangible (memories, narratives, written documents, rituals, festivals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colours, odours, etc.) elements.

Cultural heritage extends beyond monuments and artefact collections. It also includes customs or living expressions that have been passed down from our ancestors to our offspring, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social customs, rituals, holiday celebrations, knowledge and customs about nature and the cosmos, or the know-how and abilities to make traditional crafts. The abundance of knowledge and abilities that are passed down through intangible cultural legacy, rather than the cultural manifestation itself, is what makes it so significant.

The intangible components that contribute to a place's spirit are carried by the user, including their memories, stories, rituals, festivals, values, textures, colours, and odors. Thus, it is crucial to take into account the reciprocal interaction that occurs between this user and the building's associated intangible components.

2.4 IMAGE AND PERCEPT:

Image- the common and generally thought of meaning of this word is a picture or a photograph. However, the word image means (Cambridge):

- a mental picture or idea that forms in a readers' or listeners' minds from the words that they read or hear, i.e. information that they gather.

How then, does the mental image differ from percept?

As Wittgenstein says, "While I am looking at an object, I can't imagine it"

The main difference between imagery and perception is that imagery generates instances of qualitative experiences without retinal input. Mental imagery is the maintenance of a stable conscious representation in the absence of (relevant) sensory stimuli, perception occurs only when a stimulus is present. [One cannot taste, hear, touch, or smell, something unless the relevant distal stimulus is present but you can imagine a sound, smell, or taste in the absence of sensory stimulation (Bensafi et al., 2012; Arshamian and Larsson, 2014)]

2.5 EMBODIMENT OF IMAGE:

“It is unthinkable that a mind, detached from embodiment, could conceive architecture because of the undisputable role of the body in the very constitution of architecture”

The ability of the picture to mediate between physical and mental, perceptual and imaginative, factual and affactual is its most important quality.

In the words of Juhani Pallasmaa, the poetic image refers to an evocative, affective and meaningful sensory experience that is layered, associative and dynamic, and in constant interaction with memory and desire. It keeps our minds occupied, shapes our emotions and thoughts, and creates an imaginative reality. In the physical world, the poetic picture is encountered in a completely embodied and emotional way.

“Entering a space for instance implies an instant unconscious exchange, I enter and occupy a space and the space enters and occupies me.” (Pallasmaa, 2011)

2.6.1 HAPTICITY AND EMBODIED IMAGE:

The image is typically conceptualised as a fixed, solely visual representation, yet the tendency of the senses to blend and integrate is one of their defining characteristics. In the worlds of all the senses, there are images. The experience of perceiving a picture is not additive; rather, it is a cohesive one in which the whole provides context for the pieces, rather than the other way around.

“My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens. I perceive in a total way with my whole being, which speaks to all my sense at once.”(Bachelard, 2015)

Every architectural environment has distinct haptic, auditory, olfactory, and even concealed gustatory elements that contribute to the visual perception’s impression of fullness and liveliness.

The creature-like coherence and meaning of the poetry picture keep it together and help us remember it. However, perhaps we remember and regenerate the poetic image more for its emotional impact than for its formal qualities. When we perceive, all of our senses come together and, in their capacity as cultural arbiters, “mediate our experiences of the world around us.” Our sense of space influences how we value the spirit of place, this is a significant component of how we experience the built environment.

2.6.2 MATERIAL AND EMBODIED IMAGE:

Materials and surfaces have their own language. Stone’s durability and inherent permanence, in addition to its toughness and geological depth, are all visible. Brick brings us thoughts of soil, fire, gravity, and traditional building practises. According to Bachelard, the elements having the greatest ability to spark creativity are fire and water, the two genuine opposites.



Fig.1.1 Materials

A flame conjures images more easily than any other thing in the world among those that inspire reverie. Equally diverse and artistically compelling are the depictions of water. Water is a metaphor for both life and death.

A building engages in communication with the entire body of architectural history, communicates about the world through its embodied metaphor, and recounts the events leading up to its creation. All significant locations make the present tangible, bring to mind the past, and inspire hope for the future.

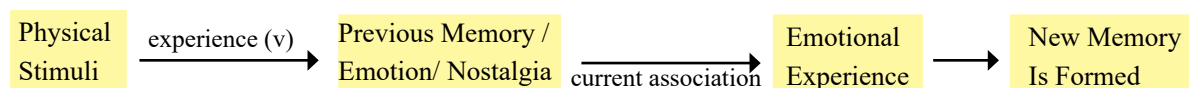
2.6.3 MEMORY AND EMBODIED IMAGE:

If one were to recall a cherished place, a place of past experience would come to mind. A place of value, it comes flooding with rich memories. One might remember the smells, sounds, textures and maybe the tastes of the place- maybe the distinct smell of the garden visited in childhood, or the feeling of water against feet on a sunny day or the calming hum of rain against windows. It is this intersection of the physical world with the memories and experiences that bring meaning, value and emotion to the place.

The strongest part of experience of a place becomes etched in us as a memory. The reactivation of imagery buried in our biological and cultural history creates a powerful and energising architectural experience.

Real architectural structures, as well as merely recalled architectural images and metaphors, serve as important memory aids in three different ways: first, they concretize remembrance by containing and projecting memories; second, they concretize remembrance by stimulating and inciting us to think back on and imagine; and third, they serve to materialise and preserve time and make it visible. Since we are the sum of our memories, memory is also the foundation of self-identity.

Architectural structures aid with remembering; for example, without the mental image of the pyramids, our comprehension of the length of time would be noticeably lower. Time is marked and concretized by the single pyramidal image. Our memories of our own childhood are also greatly shaped by the homes and places we have lived. In the same way that orators framed the themes of their speeches within the context of imagined structures, we have projected and concealed portions of our lives in lived landscapes and residences.



2.6.4 MEANING AND EMBODIED IMAGE:

When the environment is meaningful, man feels at “home”- Christian Norberg Schulz.

The meanings are the interface between the physical and psychological space of human beings. The manner in which the spaces have been occupied by various users represents their significance and the meanings they attach with them. Some significant spaces however demand a specific kind of occupancy to the existing belief systems and cultural norms for that context. They thus, become meaningful for the inhabitants. One can say that the spaces in all cases have certain meanings for the occupants and people recognize these meanings and act accordingly.

If we consider culture as a system of symbols and meanings that forms important determinants of social action which is a meaningful activity for human beings. This implies a commonality of understanding of the shared codes of communication. People communicate verbally, vocally and non-verbally.

Meaning is a psychic function; it depends on identification and implies a ‘sense of belonging

Karsten Harries says “Architecture helps to replace meaningless reality with a theatrically, or rather architecturally, transformed reality, which draws us in and, as we surrender to it, grants us an illusion of meaning.” Cosmos must be created from chaos. Images that make us feel rooted in our culture and period, conjuring up mythic connections and memories, serve as a gentle reminder that abstraction is not, as is frequently assumed, about contextlessness and meaninglessness.

People respond to their surroundings in accordance with the meanings they assign to it.

According to the meanings associated with the locations, people perceive, experience, and occupy those spaces. Meanings have a crucial and important role in how people connect with and relate to their environment. People from diverse cultural backgrounds may attach distinct meanings to the built environment, however some meanings may be broadly shared across all ethnic groups. Meanings develop and alter over time. It is a phenomenon that is highly context-specific.

Architecture has always mediated between infinite physical space into different locations and given it a human scale and significance. Great artistic creations awaken our sense of time. An archetype is an image's propensity to elicit a certain set of feelings, associations, and reactions rather than having a particular meaning. Since time immemorial, the cultural task of storytelling, literature and art was to produce and maintain 'the other level of reality'- to use a notion of Herbert Marcuse- that of beliefs, myths and ideals. Even with random and meaningless images, we naturally search for significance. More so than the actual architectural gestalt itself, the beauty and richness of an architectural picture derives from the abundance of association ideas and meanings that it conjures.

Landscapes are moment-by-moment representations of influences from the natural world, technology, and culture. These impacts create settings, which are particular places that people can choose to enter or leave. The individual encodes and decodes meaning from environments for physiological purposes of security and psychological purposes of community, esteem, and self-actualization. Associative meanings develop from the ways in which settings relate to the observer's direct and indirect experiences, while perceptual meanings develop from the ways in which settings can be perceived.

It acquires a feeling of identity and a "place" value as a result of the identification of particular sites with elusive religious and cultural ideals. If built environment and meanings are integrated, natural and cultural surroundings are transformed into place archetypes. Man "builds" the earth in the cultural landscape, bringing its potential structure into being as a meaningful whole.

The best explanation of the transformation of a potential space into a significant location can be found in Christian Norberg Schulz's "Genius Loci": There are three main ways that man-made locations relate to nature. First, man seeks to "express" his understanding of nature "visually," in an effort to improve the precision of the natural structure. Second, man must complete the existing condition by filling in any "gaps" that may exist. Finally, he has to symbolise his understanding of nature. It means a natural character is translated into a building whose properties somehow make the character manifest. The purpose of symbolization is to free the meaning from the immediate situation, whereby it becomes a "cultural object",

The poetic image is held together by its creature like coherence and meaning, which also makes us remember it, or perhaps we primarily remember and regenerate its emotional impact instead of its formal properties. As Juhani Pallasmaa says - "The ultimate meaning of any building is beyond architecture; it directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being. Profound architecture makes us experience ourselves as a complete embodied and spiritual beings".

Rapoport incorporates culture in his theory as the most important aspect and says, "The communication of meaning in Architecture is in terms of congruence, whereby people of a culture communicate their values, expectations and norms, behavior and attitudes through the built environment". Meanings are provided by the culture of the observer.

2..7 CULTURE

Our everyday world is full of symbols and meanings, most of which are contextual, that is, are deeply rooted to the place. The concrete world we live in, consisting of trees, rivers, mountains, flowers, living creatures, and cities and neighbourhoods, is a system of complex phenomena, which is "qualitative" and valuable through human perception and experience. A cultural landscape is such a complex phenomenon.

Renowned cultural geographer Carl O Sauer in his book, "The Morphology of Landscape" (Sauer), put forth some of the main ideas which became the foundation of Cultural geography and introduced the idea of a "cultured" landscape. Sauer put forward the concept of landscape as an alternative to the currently popular form of geographical explanation known as environmental determinism.⁸ While the latter sought to specify the causal influences of the environment on humans, the landscape approach sought to describe the interrelations between humans and the environment with primary attention given to the human impact on the environment. Sauer viewed landscapes broadly as areas comprising distinct associations of forms, both physical and natural, and regarded landscape study as tracing the development of natural landscapes into cultural landscapes. The success of conservation efforts is determined by the architect's capacity to capture the physical characteristics of a heritage site and the preservation of its associated values and intangible aspects.

To truly understand the complex concept of the spirit of place, it is imperative to keep in mind that all of these highly interwoven elements work together to produce it.

Due in large part to the resources developed by UNESCO, the definition of “cultural heritage” has undergone a substantial transformation in recent decades. Cultural heritage encompasses more than just object collections and monuments. It also includes traditions or living expressions that have been passed down from our ancestors to our descendants, such as performing arts, social customs, rituals, holiday celebrations, knowledge and traditions about nature and the cosmos, as well as the skills and knowledge required to make traditional crafts. Its significance is due more to the wealth of information and skills that are transmitted through intangible cultural legacy than to the cultural expression itself.

However, human creations also have the responsibility to safeguard the past, allow us to understand the evolution of civilization, and We also live in cultural, mental, and temporal realities in addition to our physical and spatial surroundings. Our lived and existential reality is a layered, continually fluctuating situation. Landscapes and buildings not only help to anchor us in time and space between the opposites of the past and the future, but architecture is fundamentally an art form of reconciliation and mediation. In actuality, land memory exists with the full body of literature and the arts. Through our mental and physical structures, we comprehend and recall who we are. Through the evidence offered by the architectural structures they have created, we also judge distant and ancient societies. Epic stories are projected by buildings.

Renowned cultural geographer Carl O Sauer in his book, “The Morphology of Landscape” (Sauer), put forth some of the main ideas which became the foundation of Cultural geography and introduced the idea of a “cultured” landscape. Sauer viewed landscapes broadly as areas comprising distinct associations of forms, both physical and natural, and regarded landscape study as tracing the development of natural landscapes into cultural landscapes

Aside from serving practical needs, architectural structures also serve important existential and psychological functions. They domesticate space for human occupation by transforming impersonal, uniform, and limitless space into distinct locations of human significance. Equally important, they make endless time bearable by giving form duration a human measure.

3.1 METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK:

The images of the ghats are extracted by conversations and questionnaire answers of tourists and locals (with varying purpose and association)

Survey:

A total of 30 interviews were conducted across all three ghats. The survey was conducted on each ghat till the narratives started to repeat.

Method- Formal questionnaire, Informal conversation

Time taken- 10-20 minutes each.

(depending on respondents time and availability)

The questionnaire focused on-

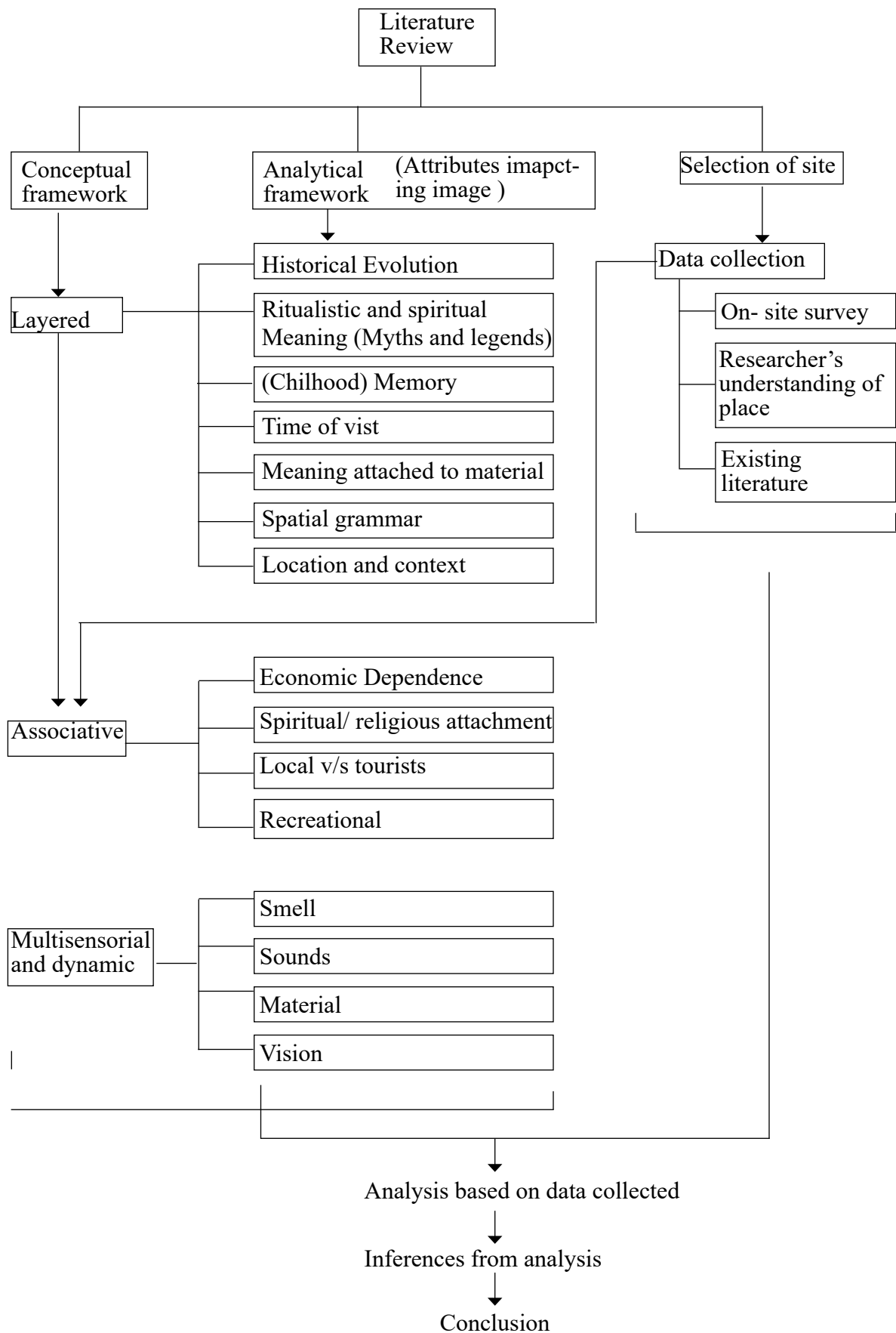
Meaning of ghat for respondent

Previous memories

Current associations

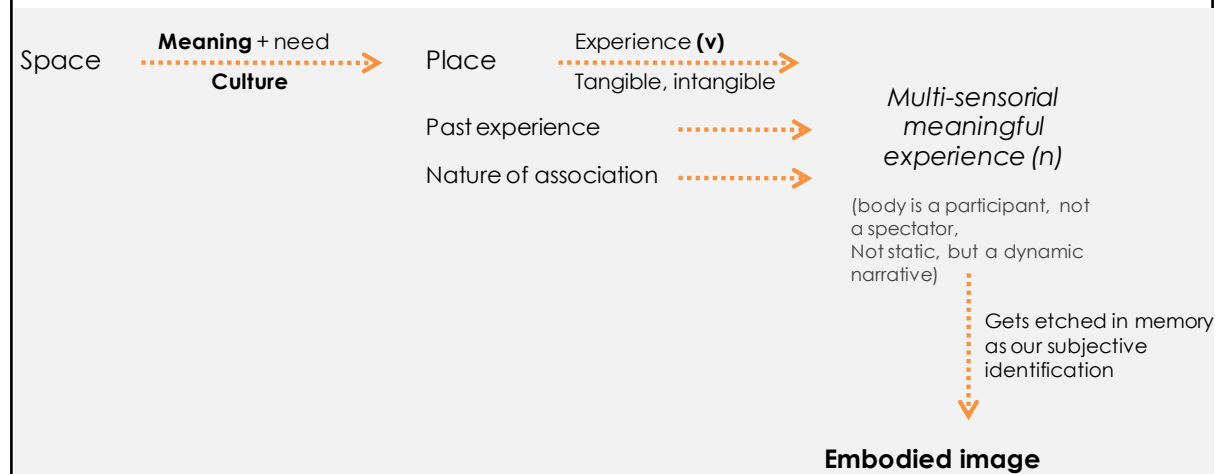
The Image formed on thinking of the ghat

The parameters for analysis are extracted by recognising themes from narratives and on-site understanding



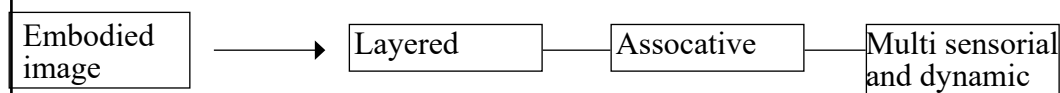
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

The embodied image is a *meaningful multi sensorial* experience that is *layered, associative and dynamic*.



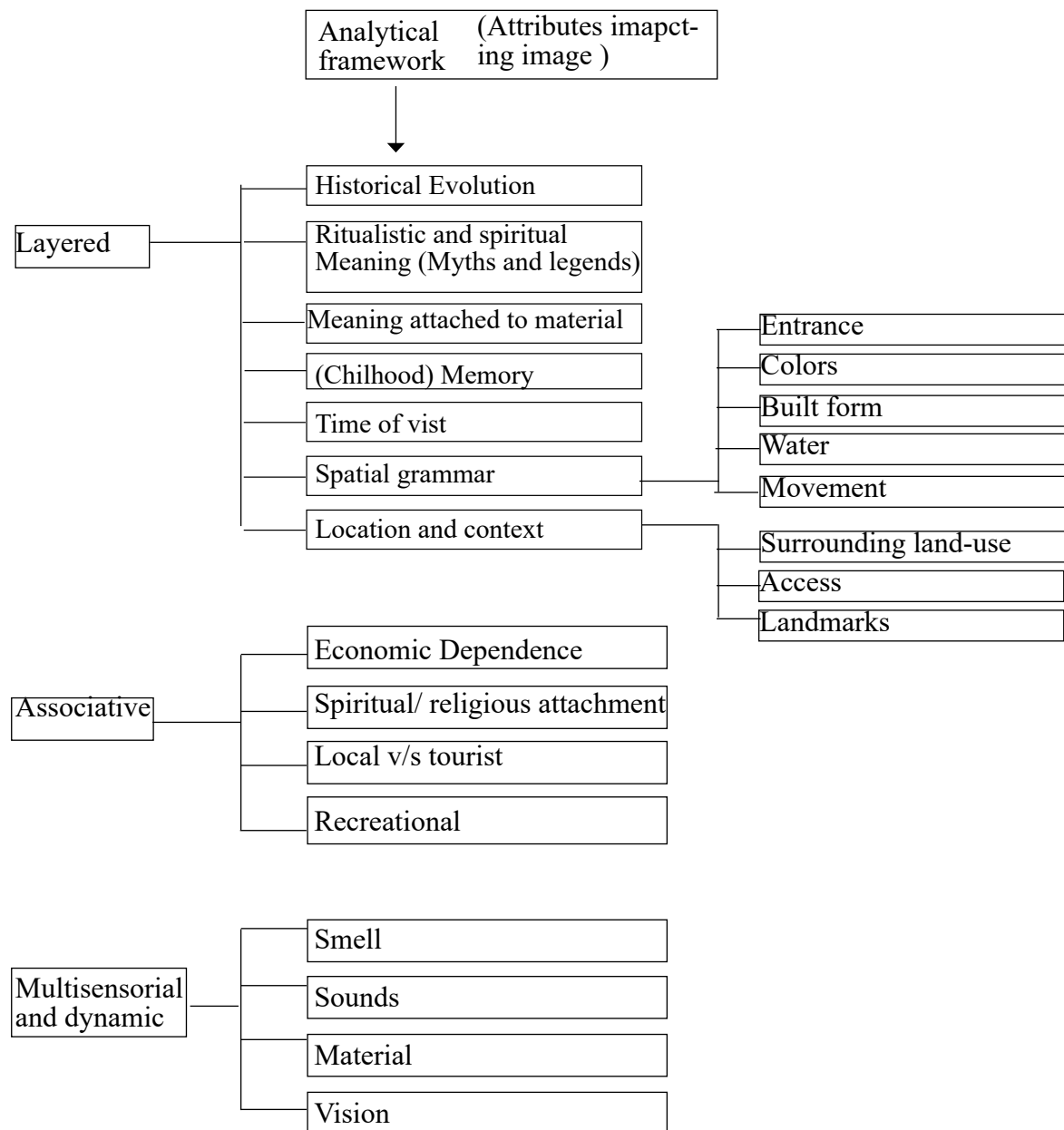
Place is formed from space when it becomes meaningful, when it caters to a purpose and is either a result of culture or allows cultural practices to be formed. It is a physical manifestation of the ideologies held by the time and people by which it is created. It embodies within it the intangible qualities – culture, traditions, knowledge, values – that gives the place a unique identity.

The experience of any place is due to its tangible and intangible elements. This experience is affected by previous experiences and memories and the emotions attached with them, with the nature of association and/ or dependency on the place. On the basis of this, a multi-sensorial experience is formed. This experience is remembered as a collage of different fragments – past emotions, current associations and the present experience due to different stimuli. The memory is not static but a narrative (flashes of events that are lived).



ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK :

From the narratives of the respondents, images are extracted and analysed on the basis of the framework. Themes of layers like childhood memories, inherent meanings related to location of site or ritualistic significance etc, associations of economic dependence v/s recreational, form of space, multisensorial elements etc. are recognised to understand their role in the formation of the image.



ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK :

1. Evolution- The changing image over time leads to understanding how the ghat has developed till now in response to the changing lifestyle and use.

2. Meaning - People respond to their surroundings in accordance with the meanings they assign to it. According to the meanings associated with the locations, people perceive, experience, and occupy those spaces. When the meaning is inherent, a pre conceived image is formed on the basis of this meaning, which has an impact on the actual experience in place. It leads to an emotion being attached to the place even before physically being there.

Myths and rituals- The conceptual organization of the religious world is significantly influenced by myths and symbols. Understanding the ghat, requires knowledge of its “sacred geography.” The culture’s cosmic worldview serves as a conceptual organizing principle and aids the dweller and the visitor in making sense of the city.

3. Meaning (material)– Materials like water and fire have an inherent meaning of tranquility and hope that are shared by everyone and are unconsciously realized and hence make an impact of the overall experience.

4. Childhood memory- Past memories carry emotions that affect the present experience. It also helps in understanding how the ghat changed for them due to difference in association.

5. Time of visit – The experience of any place varies vastly as per the time of visit- due to the activities as well as the atmosphere.

6. Spatial grammar – The experience is affected by the meaning and association, but is supported and enhanced by the spatial grammar which makes it memorable, for example, the steep steps of Dashashwamedh ghat and the bottleneck entrance enhance the release on seeing the horizon from the dense street.

7. Activities– Different activities create different purposes to visit, and are also responsible for the dynamism in the atmosphere. These activities also play a role in shaping the spatial grammar

8. Location and context– Attributes of nearby landmarks, easy access etc lead to increasing popularity of the ghat.

Associations– Associations create different meanings of the same place, for example –for the association of vending the place is meaningful due to the economic dependency that it fulfills. Places allow different associations and narratives – like a place of childhood games, place of bathing or a place of hanging out with friends etc. On the basis of these different associations and different meanings, the use of how the place is used/ what of the space is experienced changes and hence creates different embodied images.

10. Multisensory and dynamic– The images are not static but are dynamic narratives that play In the memory scape. They are not only visual but are affected by all the senses(sound smell) which is how one is able to place oneself in the memory

3.2 CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF CASE STUDY

As per the factors affecting embodied image extracted from Juhani Pallasmaa's framework, the attributes important for selection of the site are:

1. Meaning- Inherent historical, mythological and spiritual meanings affect the experience and emotions of the user. A strong cultural landscape allow analysis of role of associations and meaning in formation of embodied image.

2. Waterscapes – Water has a strong meaning and the touch, temperature, sound and visual make it an important haptic element in any landscape. Depending on the situation and cultural context, water can represent a variety of things. It is frequently linked to the subconscious mind, emotions, and themes of life, purity, and cleaning.

3. Imageability - That quality in a physical object, which gives it, a high probability of evoking a strong image in an observer. Within this dissertation it may also refer to the self-image of a community both socially and spatially.

4. VARANASI

4.1 INTRODCUTION

Water being a powerful sensorial element, riverfront was chosen, to understand the connection between culture and the embodied image, ghats were picked.

The land-water interface on the Ganga's banks is fashioned out of the need to access the rising and falling water levels in the monsoon and dry seasons. The cultural landscape of this interface—ghats (steps and landings) lined by temples and other public buildings, pavilions—is layered and kinetic, and responsive to the river's flow. The ghats of Varanasi, where the Ganga turns northward, form a crescent sweep over a 6.8 kilometre area. Although they have undergone substantial renovation and expansion over the last three centuries, they actually date back to the 14th century. This has allowed access to the holy Ganga from the temples and shrines of this ancient city. Old Varanasi's winding lanes come to an end at the large ghat landings, which are used by locals, visitors, and pilgrims to access the river, where people worship, take baths, and bury the dead. The ghats serve as public gathering places, sacred places, and cremation grounds. As such, they serve as venues for ongoing performances of historic customs that preserve cultural memories, convictions, and values as well as an extraordinary cultural treasure in their history.

Varanasi, this name of the city is derived by combining the names of the two rivers Varuna (the averter) and- Assi(the sword) flowing on the north and South ends respectively. In Hindu mythology, Varanasi is the place where Shiva settled his home when he married Parvati. It is mentioned in the Puranas as the most sacred of space. Varanasi is the cultural mosaic of India, encapsulating all the variety and uniqueness of India's regional traditions. The passage of time has seen the superimposition of many traditions.

People have settled in this city from all over India, speaking many languages and dialects and bearing their traits and customs, all the while keeping their own internal cultures and assimilating into the collage culture of the city on the outside. It is an all-Indian metropolis whose character is a blend of regional variety in terms of identity, language, and custom.

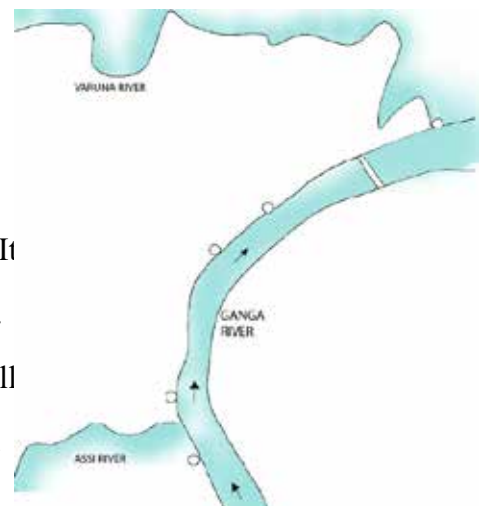


Fig. 4.1 City shaped by the Rivers

WHAT MAKES VARANASI DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHER HOLY CITIES?

“Varanasi is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.” – Mark Twain

The city awakens each morning by praying to the sacred river. People assemble for the morning Aarti (prayer) just before dawn, as the sun rises across the Ghats. Here, the dawn is heralded by the aroma of incense, the ringing of temple bells, vibrant flowers, and echoing chants.

The word “tirtha” comes from the Sanskrit root “tr,” which means to ford or cross a river.

The term “Tirtha” originally referred to a location where a river could be forded, and it was initially selected only for its practical purpose. Since taking a bath has such a significant religious meaning for Hindus, several tirthas designate places on rivers where bathing had a very particular significance. Singh and Malville (2002) Few locations and pilgrimage cycles have grown to prominence over the years among India’s tens of thousands of Tirthas. The highest spiritual objective, emancipation, is said to be bestowed by the seven sacred cities (sapta puri). (L.Eck, 1983).

“There are few cities in India as traditionally Hindu and as symbolic of the whole of Hindu culture as the city of Varanasi. It is a city as rich as all India. ” - Diana Eck

Additionally, the city itself duplicates the seven tirthas or saptapuri prototypes. All of India’s big tirthas are replicated and proliferated elsewhere in India to some extent, but none are as numerous as Kashi. What makes Kashi “unique” is that it has become the City of All India by most effectively gathering and reflecting the light of India’s tirthas. **It is mentioned in the Puranas as the most sacred of space.**

The sacrificial virtue of Shiva’s City Varanasi is also enhanced because the Ganga at this point takes a sweeping turn, so that its current while it passes Varanasi is flowing in a northerly direction, or towards the Himalayas, where Shiva is said to dwell. This aspect of the river-front of the city facing the rising sun was another point which may have guided the choice of the early Aryan or pre-Aryan Sun worshipers.

WHY SUGGEST AN ALTERNATE WAY OF LOOKING AT THIS CULTURAL LANDSCAPE ?

The Ganga's visually stunning unfolding panoramic views of the ghats have predominated pictures and paintings that depict Varanasi.

James Prinsep's engravings from the 1830s capture the earliest gorgeous scenes that romanticize decay through time. These photographs influenced later depictions of the Ghat skyline, which is intrinsically tied to the character of the city.

This 'style of seeing' embodies the Western picturesque tradition and is linked to the aesthetic pleasure found in the vista. I believe that the ghats' experience cannot be adequately described by the notion of the environment as just a picturesque scene.

Instead, the cultural landscape ought to be seen as a contextual event that involves text that is performed and enacted as well as experienced via all the senses. The visitor participates in ritual acts to varied degrees during social occasions focused on the Ganga. The sensory stimuli during the immersive ghat experience includes visual, kinesthetic, tactile, olfactory sensations.

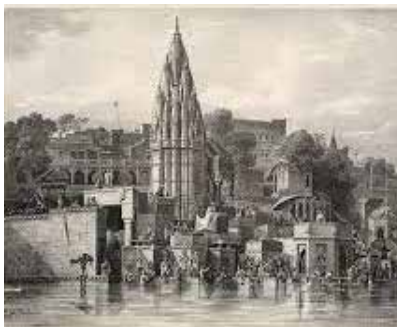


Fig.4.2 James Prinsep's engraving of Dashashwamedh Ghat
Source- Old Indian Photos



Fig.4.3 Collage of Varanasi (city as narrative)

MYTHS AND LEGENDS:

Myths explain the sacred geography of Varanasi and the embodied practices that give it meaning and value in ways history cannot. The scenery is given a strong and enduring quality by their performances. Varanasi can be traced to the blissful forest of Anandvana, where Lord Shiva can be seen sitting in a yogic position with his eyes closed and paying special attention

to his wife Parvati playing the veena. He uses his yogic strength and her music to construct the universe that is contained inside Kashi. He uses his trident to secure the city and set it apart from the effects of time. The sixty thousand sons of King Sagara are revived as a result of sage Bhagirath's penance, and he catches the sacred Ganga in his hair as she flows from heaven. She cleanses and sanctifies, removing physical filth and moral transgressions. The Ganga fosters rich visual, tactile, and haptic sensations in mundane, everyday actions and acts that have profound meaning .

Ritual bathing at festivals, during pilgrimages, and during life cycle events has persisted throughout history and has enormous significance. An impressive spectacle is created when up to 70 million people immerse themselves in the Ganga on auspicious days as a result of massively self-organized activities. The river and its banks serve as the backdrop for improvised and organised ritual performances.

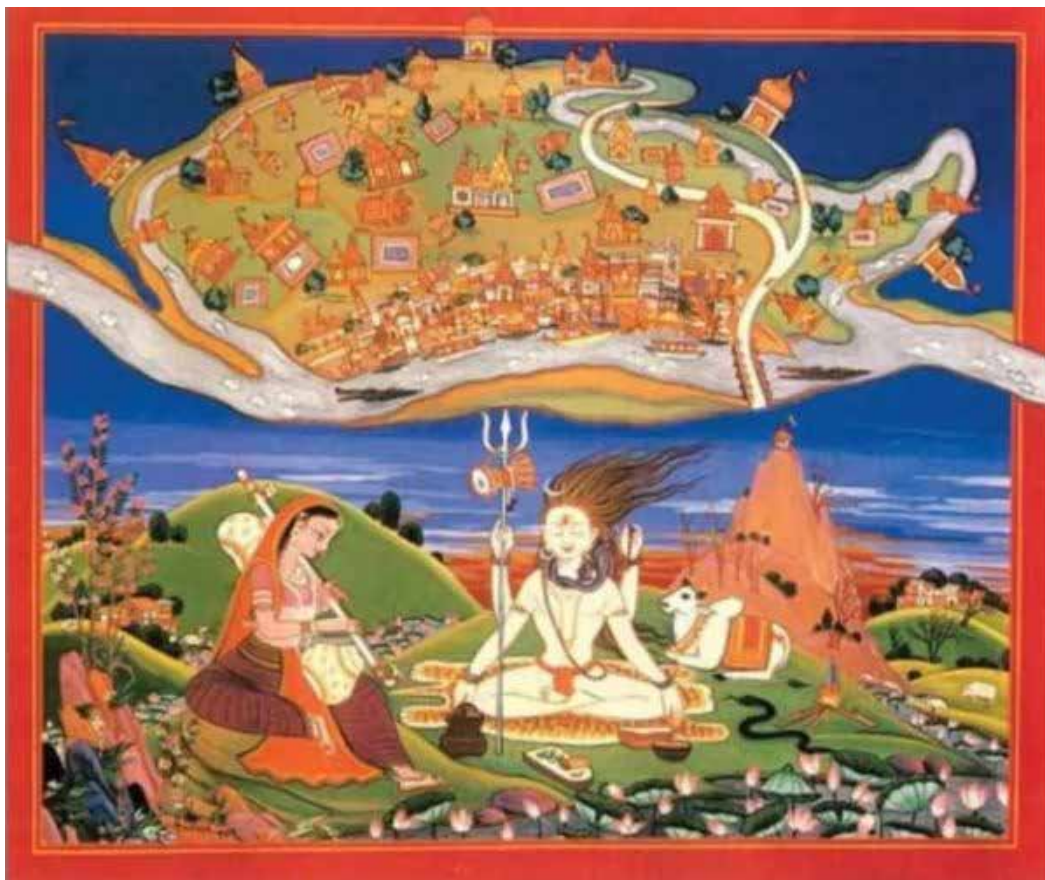


Fig. 4.4 Myths shaping Varanasi
Source: Varanasiguru.org

HISTORY AND HISTORICAL IMAGERY;

Akhanda Bharat. During this time, *countless dharmasalas, halls, bathing ghats, gardens, palatial homes for merchants, and homes for poor people were constructed*. The city of Varanasi had a generally rectangular layout, with wide arterial routes parallel to the Ganga River flowing from north to south and narrow lanes with residential buildings running from east to west. Another significant development during the Gupta Period was *the acceptance of it as the most sacred place on earth, complete with Shiva Lingas, historic temples, bathing ghats, and the Ganges*. Varanasi served as the focal point of the Advaita and Hindu revival.

It has been described as *a thriving township with the Ganga flowing on one side and three sides of deep forest*. The city grew southward towards the Dashashwamedh Ghat road around the eighth century. Many hermitages were established in this sacred city by sages, saints, yogis, and tapasvis. For the welfare of the cosmos, they would carry out the ceremonies and rituals outlined in the Hindu scriptures and teach knowledge of the Shastras.



Fig.4.5 Map of Varanasi
Source- Varanasigiri.org

The sacrosanct city also became an *administrative and political seat of power under the Gahadavalas* and thereby, became the imperial capital of Akhanda Bharat for the first time in nearly two thousand years. The last time Kashi had been looked at as a prominent political capital was between the 6th and 7th centuries BCE. The major expansion and alteration of landscape took place between 8th and 12th centuries. The first settlements were in the north to the convergence of the Varunato the Ganga, and later by the mid 10th century city expanded in the southern side.

The rich city was reduced to rubble in 1193 – 94, rivers of blood flowed and bodies of Hindus were piled up with none to perform the last rites. . During 1206 – 1210, the temples of Kashi Vishwanathji, Kritivasheshwara, Avimukteshwara and others were razed to the ground.

By the end of the 17th century, a sizeable number of Maharashtrian Brahmins began to settle here.

The Marathas took it upon themselves to restore the historical city to its former glory. Bathing ghats, dharmashalas, schools, maths, wells and others were built by the Peshwas, Maratha Generals and devotees.

The Marathas, who conveyed their unending gratitude to the sacred city and its citizens for sheltering Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the true and legitimate sovereign of Akhanda Bharat and rescuer of Hindus, are largely responsible for the creation of modern Varanasi.



Fig.4.6 Streets of Varanasi
Source- Banaras city of light
by Diana eck

Shrimant Peshwa Baji Rao I oversaw the construction of Manikarnika and Dashashwamedha Ghats and the residential quarters for the priests and sevaks.

As Varanasi continued to develop and prosper, nearby territories were under pressure to meet the expanding needs of the city and its tourists. The region's resource base had reached its capacity by 1800. On the site of the fabled Forest of Bliss, the town itself was built. But *by the eighteenth century, locals only had recollections of the once-abundant woodlands*, claims Diana L.Eck.

By the early 19th century Varanasi grew to be one of the northern India's largest cities (Varady 1989)

After independence, the significance of the city of Varanasi was not limited to the pilgrims. In fact, migration from various sections of the nation occurred in the city as a result of the division. The government wished to provide this religious city with a clear growth path. In the years immediately following independence, a variety of organisations were established to meet the requirements of the city on both a state and local level.

4.2 INTRODUCTION OF GHATS:

One image of the west bank is as the spinal column of the primordial purusha. The Assi and Varana Rivers are envisioned as nadi channels mixing with the liquid shakti of Ganga, and the Ganga is conceptualised as the kundalini strength rising through the lotus chakras in his spine. Varanasi is compared to the highest of the six chakras, where enlightenment takes place. Although Shiva is the city's most prominent god, Vishnu and Brahma are also present.

In Varanasi the threads of the myths are woven into a complex tapestry. Myth and reality blur into each other and the modern world is yet another possibility out of many simultaneous multiple existences. Around and in-between the many sacred 'centres', everyday life swirls—commerce, recreation, and craft making occur in spatial practices of multiple communities. The Ghats in Varanasi are embankments made in steps of stone slabs along the river-bank where Hindus perform ritual ablutions. The ghats are an essential complement to the Hindu concept of divinity represented in physical and supernatural elements. Banaras has about 84 ghats, most of which are chosen for ablutions by pilgrims and spiritually significant puja ceremony, while some are used as Hindu cremation sites

The names of the ghats carry stories behind them based on significant mythical and real events and stories. Each ghat of Varanasi has its own history and myth. Despite the similar context, the 84 ghats are different owing to the time of their creation and the rituals they support. Tulsi Ghat named after the great poet Tulsidas (1547-1622 A.D.) who wrote Ramcharitmanas, a translation of the Sanskrit epic Ramayana. Tulsidas established a monastery, Hanuman temple and Askaha immediately above the ghat. Assi ghat's name is derived from the river Assi.

Fig.4.7 Stretch of ghats
Source- Tale of 2 backpackers

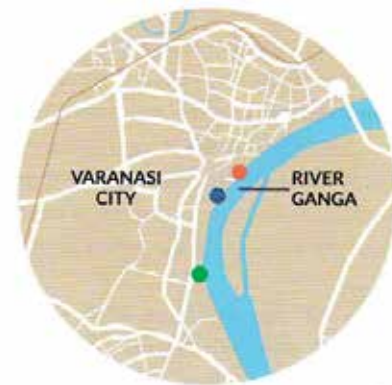
5. DASHASHWAMEDH GHAT:

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Dashashwamedh Ghat is one of the panch tirthas-the five most sacred sites on the banks of the Ganga in Varanasi.

It is the busiest ghat in Banaras. It is widely known for the Ganga Aarti that happens here. It is the most important ghat of Banaras located on the middle of the city's riverfront, close to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple.

The ghat is around 50 meters wide and around 600 meters long, and it is lined with several temples, shrines, and other buildings. The main roads of the city converge at this ghat.



Location of Dashashwamedh ghat ●
Location of Manikarnika ghat ●
Location of Assi ghat ●

5.2 SEQUENCING EVOLUTION - How did the image change over time?



Fig 5.1 Old photo of Dashashwamedh
Source- British Library

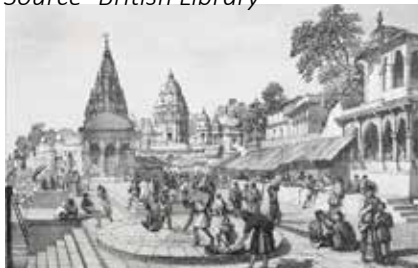
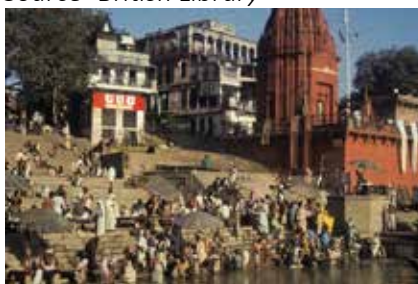


Fig 5.2, 5.3 Old photo of Dashashwamedh
Source- British Library



Since the beginning, taking a dip in the holy water of Ganga is believed to wash away sins. In the beginning, the ghat was used by locals for the everyday act of bathing and praying.

Along with its religious meaning, the ghat was popular due to its central location. The ghat gained political significance and became an important point of trade due to accessibility via water.

The Maratha and Peshwa rulers are responsible for much of the built form surrounding the ghat today. It was reconstructed by the Bajirao Peshwa I in the year 1740 AD and was later reconstructed by the Queen of the Indore (princess Ahilyabai Holkar) in the year 1774.



Godavari stream was filled up and now acts as the main approach road to dasashwamedh ghat, which is one of the reasons of popularity of the ghat. The triangulated open space at the bifurcation of the two roads of dasashwamedh ghat was earlier the area where godavari stream used to flow.



Fig.5.4 Dashashwamedh ghat

Fig 5.5 Godavari stream conceptual

Fig 5.6 Godowlia chowk and Dashshwamedh ghat

The paved steps with the shops surrounding the ghats and other developments are done by the Indian government in 1965.

The elaborate Ganga aarti, assumed to be an age old tradition has a recent origin of 1985- started in order to attract more tourists.



Fig 5.7 Ganga Aarti

Beginning as a part of the everyday life of residents around, Dashashwamedh ghat has evolved to be a major tourist spot. Location and easy accessibility have played an important role in the development of this ghat.

5.3 MEANING:

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

The conceptual organisation of the religious world is significantly influenced by myths and symbols. Understanding the ghat, requires knowledge of its “sacred geography.” The culture’s cosmic worldview serves as a conceptual organising principle and aids the dweller and the visitor in making sense of the city. In ancient texts, Dashashwamedha Ghat is mentioned as Rudra Sarovar Ghat and the Ganga, in front of it, is considered as Rudra Sarovar Tirtha. A holy dip in Rudra Sarovar Tirtha destroys all sins and ensures attainment of liberation from the cycle of birth & rebirth.

Etymology- Rudra Sarovar (name of Lord Shiva) → Dashashwamedh (occurrence of significant mythical event)

“Dashashwamedh” is a Sanskrit word that can be broken down into two parts:

“Dash” means ten, and “Ashwamedh” refers to a horse sacrifice ritual. *[historical myth]*

The sacrifices were executed and Brahma went on to establish the Brahmeshvara lingam here. Since that time, Dashashwamedha has become one of the most celebrated pilgrimages for Hindus.

Rituals and activities:

- The Ganga Arti- The Aarti happening here is considered to be holy and is a form of respect and gratitude to Ganga Ma. The emotion of faith attached to the ritual along with the multisensory vibrant action of the flame of the Arti against the dark sky, surrounded by chants and pleasant smells of agarbati and camphor form a memorable experience
- Pind daan- Pind daan and other Hindu rituals are done on this ghat
- Blessings for married couple- It is considered auspicious for a newly wedded couple to take blessings of the holy river Ganga Ma, for which the ceremonial procession is often seen on the ghat.
- Ganga snan- Bathing on this ghat is believed to wash away sins and devotees can reap the benefits of this sacrifice performed by Brahma.

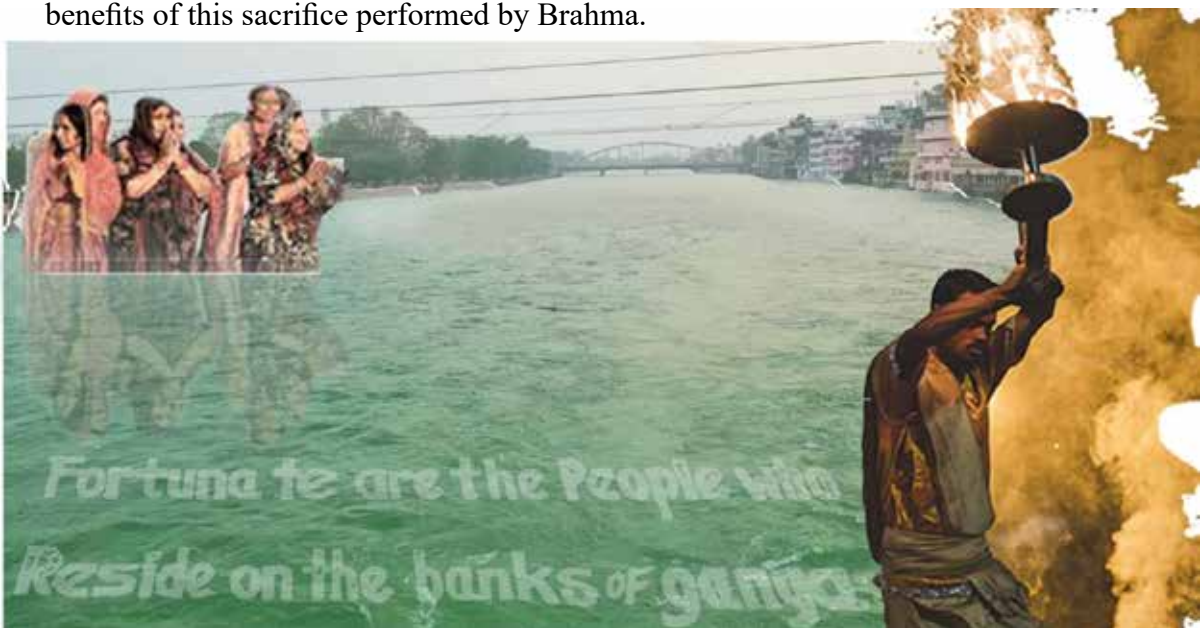


Fig 5.8 Meanings In Dashashwamedh ghat

MEANING ATTACHED TO MATERIAL:

Materials and surfaces have their own language and the ability to conjure meaning. The collective meanings of materials are extracted from the narratives.

Materials on Dashashwamedh ghat:

- Water—Water in itself, even without any cultural association is the most potent image of the imagination. It brings a sense of tranquility and purity with it. It acts as a bridge between the cosmic and the real. In Banaras, the water of river Ganga is considered to be holy, redemptive. Despite the water being muddy or dirty it is thought of as purifying due to the meaning attached to it.
- Stone – It gives a sense of permanence, the water washed against the stone steps and the leftover signs of vendors or people having occupied the platforms show the passing of time, the texture makes it seem earthy.
- Orange of backdrop – The colors orange yellow and brown forming the backdrop of the ghat give a sense of warmth and vibrancy to the place



Fig 5.9 Meanings in materials of Dashasgwamedh ghat

5.4 TIME OF VISIT

The experience of any place varies across time. For Dashashwamedh ghat, the experience during the Ganga Aarti and during the other times is vastly different. Throughout the day, there are multiple different activities happening at different junctions of the ghat

DAY:

Multiple different activities:

- 1, Ritualistic, religious vending near the river
2. Commercial vending like- food, Rudraksh malas, toys, chai, paan, jewellery
3. People sitting on steps
- 4, Boating vendors at river edge
5. People bathing

During the day, the ghat is divided into multiple different activities, people who don't engage in these activities come here to watch the dynamic atmosphere. The orange backdrop with the tranquil blue of the river stands out. Sightlines constantly shift across the variety of activities and the landscape keeps moving and shifting.



Fig 5.10 GDashashwamedh ghat plan activity mapping during day

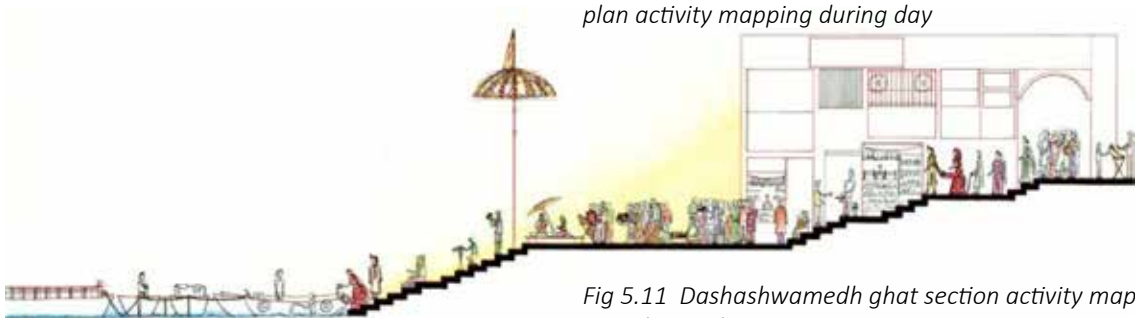


Fig 5.11 Dashashwamedh ghat section activity mapping during day



Fig 5.12 Collage showing dynamic nature of ghat

Aarti:

During the aarti, the entire ghat becomes one. A singular activity that overpowers anything else. The everyday space suddenly becomes ceremonial.

The platforms become stage sets for a choreographed event performed in unison. This involves invoking the presence of Ganga and venerating her prowess by singing her glories. The wooden benches due to its multiple use allows this, the wider platforms allow space for vending as well arrangement of chairs.

The marhis that store the chairs and the dressing room right below also play an important role. The steel frame of umbrellas hints at a celebration waiting to happen.



Fig 5.13 Ganga Aarti
Source- TOI



Fig 5.14 Dashashwamedh ghat plan activity mapping during Aarti



Fig 5.15 Dashashwamedh ghat section activity mapping during Aarti

5.5 CHILDHOOD MEMORY

The previous image of ghat for everyday users in their childhood , when their association was recreational and not dependent evokes nostalgic memories of juming in the water, baoting, playing on steps and swimming to the pther side. They remember that back then the ghats were unpaved and there were significantly fewer people, activities and shops. The people for whom the ghat was not a place they frequented in childhood remember dirt in the water. The irony of women bathing naked in public in a place of religion that believes in covering up stands out.Haptic elemets like coolness and sound of water on jumping in,smell of dirty water become important aspects of this multisensory image



Fig 5.16 Collage of childhood memory as per narrative

5.6 SPATIAL GRAMMAR

1. Strong sense of arrival

Entry 1 – Walking to the wide-open ghats from the narrow dark lanes of old Varanasi is a study in contrast in kinesthetic and haptic perception. First the broad roads narrow down into a street, and built in front is replaced by water. The endless water against the horizon brings a sense of release from the extremely dense fabric of the city. Before the steps, the water is seen (due to the steep ratio). This sense of release due to the small bottleneck entrance and the endless water against the horizon make a memorable narrative. The release that is experienced reminds the tourist of the release the spiritual wisdom is supposed to grant making the narrative meaningful and relatable.

The angled street shows the built form in the elevation. It straightens towards the end and during this turn the river and the sky become visible. ●



Fig 5.17 Section of route



Fig 5.18 Plan of route from Godowlia to dashashwamedh



Fig 5.19 Axo showing increase in width



Fig 5.20 Collage of entry as per narratives

Entry 2 - While entering the ghat from adjacent ghats, Walking along the ghats next to the river, on reaching Dashashwamedh, the sense of it being a place of significance is apparent due to the ceremonial backdrop of floral umbrellas and golden cloth wrapped metal frame.

The ghat also widens towards left, narrowing towards the Godowlia chowk entrance because of which the linearity along the Ganga across the other ghats, now becomes perpendicular to it.

There is also an increase in vending activities, density of people and cleanliness.

2. Backdrop of orange, yellow and brown

The layered backdrop of orange yellow and brown creates a sense of warmth. The layering breaks monotony and allows the space to feel bigger due to eyesight being able to see far.

The ringing bells in the surrounding temples add to the warmth



Fig 5.21 Dashashwamedh ghat - Backdrop and Layering

3. Water

Meaning - The holy river acts as the physical symbol of the connection to the divine.

Reflection- The built mass is softened in the reflection. The reflection of the sun in the water during the day and the night sky at night gives a sense of infinity and vastness. Flow- Entrance along the ghats is emphasized by the directionality of flowing water

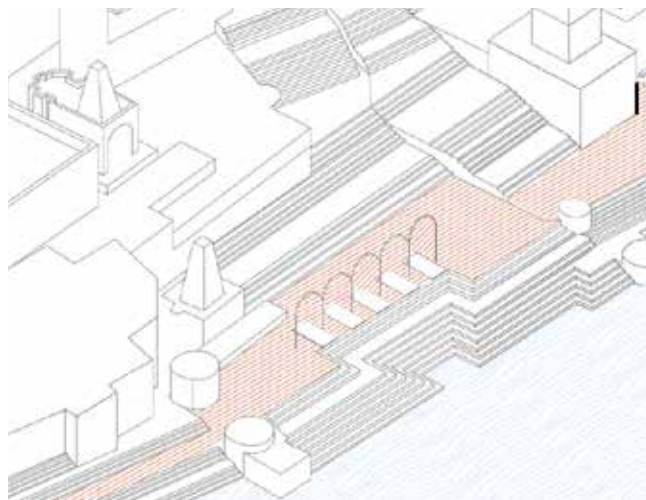
Color- The changing color as per seasons shows its connection to its origins from the Himalayas

Hapticity- The coolness of water felt on bathing, the sound on splashing in and the gentle murmur on approaching ghats and visual reflection in the water play a large role in the overall experience.

Activities supported- Bathing near the steps and marhis, boating at the centre of the river, boats parked near the edge, asthi visarjan near the edge or on boat at the centre of the river the Arti happens for the holy river



Fig 5.22 Built form reflected in water



Entrance along ghats emphasized by directionality of water



Fig 5.23 Water changing colors as per seasons- Muddy in monsoons, green blue in summer, white in winters

4. Steps

Material- Stone

Meaning- medium of connection to river, therefore connecting the sacred with the humane.

Steepness- The steeper than usual steps make one highly aware of the climbing process. The steepness allow one to view the river from the most farther steps which is why many people prefer to sit there, away from the chaos.

Activities supported – narrow for seating while the broader ones are occupied by vendors for stalls and movements. The spectators sit on the steps and platform to watch the Ganga Aarti.

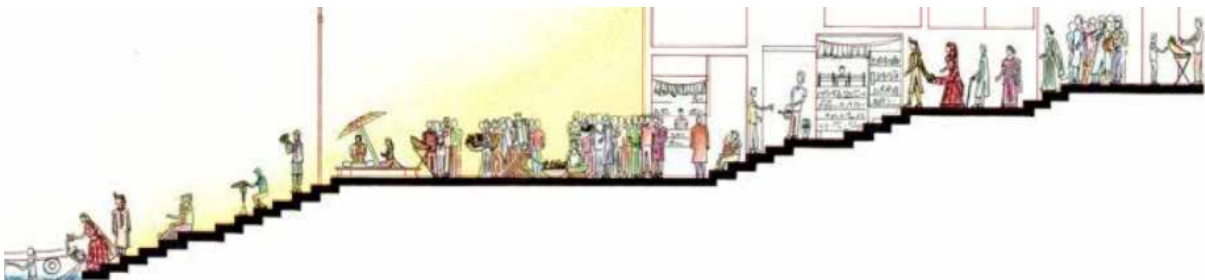


Fig 5.24 Section showing steps and activity



Fig 5.25 Photos showing steps and activity

- Religious/ ritualistic vending
- Commercial vending- eateries, boating
- Spectators

5. Marhi

Solid marhis- serve the structural requirement of retaining the steps.

Relation to steps- This division along the length gives the flight scale and a sense of enclosure that gives directionality(axis) towards the river to these steps. They also break down the continuous stretch making the scale relatable.

Activities supported- vending on top of them due to higher height, seating on top of them away from footfall, the hollow marhis are used as changing rooms

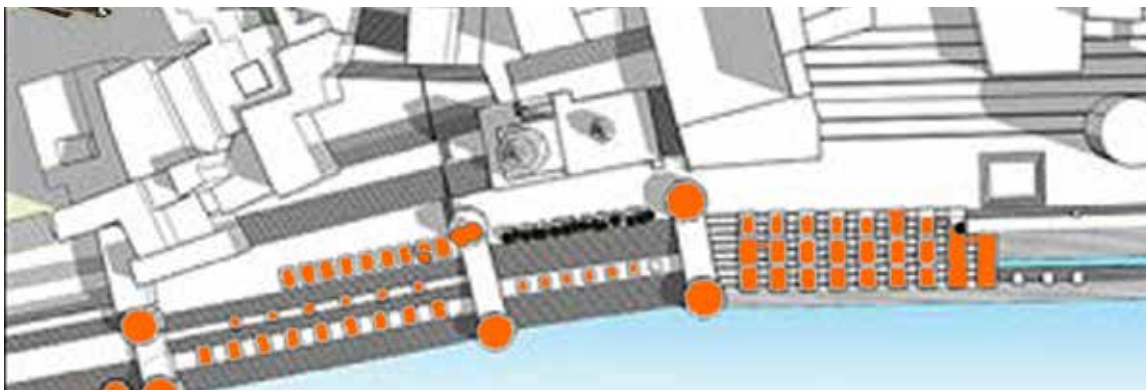


Fig 5.26 a.Marhis as changng rooms, b.Marhis highlighted in photo, c. Marhis highlighted in section

6. Wooden platform with/ without umberellas

These wooden benches are used throughout the day by vendors to sleep or sell items, a group of vendors will usually gather on different benches when the crowd is less to chit chat and gossip before wrapping up. One or multiple colorful or plain bamboo umbrellas rest on top of these benches, so many that they form an important part of the silhouette during the day.

1.5 - 2 Metres diameter of size, they also define the domain of each priest

During the evening, before the Aarti, these benches are cleaned and a fresh carpet like cloth is laid on top of it. It now becomes a decorative dais for the Pujaris to stand on during the Aarti.



Fig 5.27 Photos showing wooden benches as per use throughout the day

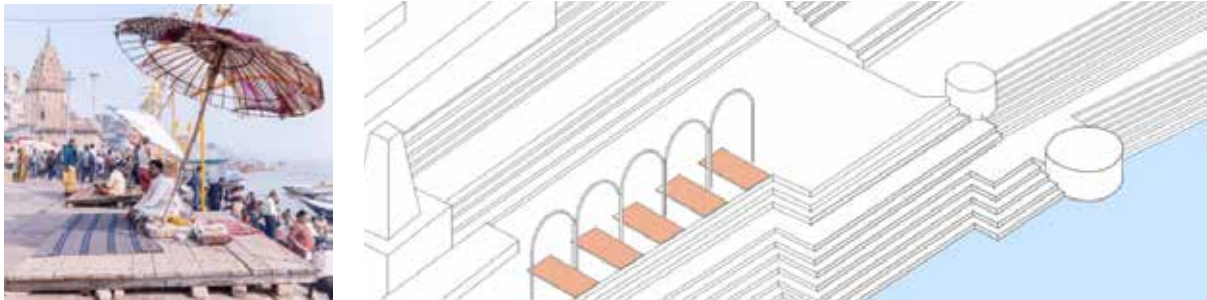


Fig 5.28 a. Bamboo umbrella and bench b. Benches highlighted in axo

6. MANIKARNIKA GHAT:

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Manikarnika Ghat, also known as the great cemetery, is one of the major ghats in the long stretch of the holy river Ganges. This ghat is one of the two most important cremation ghats in Varanasi. It is located in the middle of the Ganges. Cemeteries in Indian cities outside the human habitation area but in Varanasi, the ghat is located in a central position.



Location of Dashashwamedh ghat ●
 Location of Manikarnika ghat ●
 Location of Assi ghat ●

6.2 SEQUENCING EVOLUTION

The custom of cremation on the riverfront had previously been restricted to Harishchandra ghat, however Rao Surjan's actions initiated a tradition of royal cremation at Manikarnika ghat. His decision to be cremated here was based on Narayan Bhatt's emphasis on Manikarnika as the ideal site of cremation. Rao Surjan's cremation at Manikarnika ghat in the 17th century initiated the cremation on Manikarnika ghat and marked it as a prominent site.



Manikarnika ghat can be traced back to 1302. It was the first ghat to be built in stone.



Ahilyabai Holkar, the Maratha Queen of Indore, constructed the majority of the lower ghat in 1791. Prior to this, Maratha Peshwa Bajiroa carried out minor construction work in 1735,

Photo -1830



Across multiple changing rulers- Mughal ,British, Maratha, the Hindu traditions were and customs were restricted, cremation on manikarnika ghat was the only one that continued (although with high taxes)

A higher platform on the ghats was built by Raja Moti Chand, a landowner and patron of the arts in Banaras, in 1912.

Photo -1906,1925



Fig 6.1 Manikarnika ghat old photos
Source - British Library



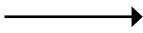
Fig 6.2 Manikarnika ghat

Not a single day passes when dead bodies are not cremated here with the number going up to **two to three hundred every day.**

6.3 MYTHS AND LEGENDS

“We do not see the same city that Hindus see.” - Diana Eck

The conceptual organisation of the religious world is significantly influenced by myths and symbols. Understanding the ghat, requires knowledge of its “sacred geography.” The culture’s cosmic worldview serves as a conceptual organising principle and aids the dweller and the visitor in making sense of the city.

Etymology - Jalasai Ghat  Manikarnika ghat
(Name of Vishnu) (As per the name of nearby Manikarnika kund)

According to Hindu legend, the Manikarnika ghat is particularly sacred, and those who are burned there receive moksha. According to legend, Lord Vishnu persuaded Shiva, after enduring countless years of tapasya, not to destroy the sacred city of Kashi when he decimates the earth. Before Vishnu arrived in Kashi, Lord Shiva and his wife Parvati came to fulfil his wish. In exchange, Vishnu dug a kund (well) on the banks of the Ganges for the couple’s bath. Manikarnika got its name because, while taking a bath, a Mani (diamond) from Shiva’s earring dropped into the kund. In Hindu mythology, fire and water are sources of rich imagery and are connected to both life-giving energies and destruction at the cosmic conflagration at the end of time. The emergence of life is symbolised by fire, which also purges impurities.

According to the Hindu mythology, being burned here provides an instant gateway to liberation from the cycle of births and rebirths. Lying at the center of the five tirthas, Manikarnika Ghat symbolizes both creation and destruction. At Manikarnika Ghat, the mortal remains are consigned to flames with the prayers that the souls rest in eternal peace.

Hindus believe that Lord Shiva whispers special chants (mantras) here to help humans break through the cycle of rebirth to attain permanent salvation.

At the final departure, the body should be surrounded by the five elements (called the “Pancha Bhootas” in Hinduism). These five elements are Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Space.

The alignment of the funeral pyre should be in the North-South direction. The Hindu God of Death – Yama, is believed to come from the South to drag away the dead.



Fig 6.3 Manikarnika ghat in narratives

MATERIAL:

Water –Waters of creation and fires of destruction make Manikarnika Ghat very powerful as it distills all of Varanasi's sacred energies.

Fire – Fire in cremation is the symbol of archetypal fire. It signifies the germination of life and burns away the impurities. Seen from the river, the ghat stands out with the fires burning and smoke rising towards the sky

Soot-covered buildings - Manikarnika Ghat is instantly recognizable by its smoking fires, soot covered buildings, sign of the cremation ritual that has been happening here since centuries

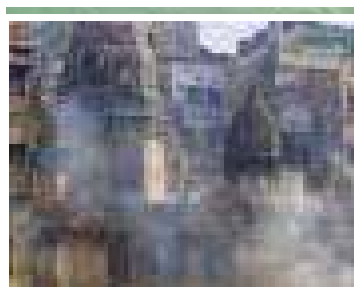


Fig 6.4 Material and meaning in Manikarnika ghat

6.4 TIME OF VISIT

The experience of any place varies across time. For Dashashwamedh ghat, the experience during the Ganga Aarti and during the other times is vastly different. Throughout the day, there are multiple different activities happening at different junctions of the ghat

For Manikarika ghat, the experience at night v/s the day is very different, at night the flame against the dark sky seems to be more powerful. The surrounding ghats are quieter at day and in the absence of brightness of daylight, the confluence of natural elements of sky, fire and their reflection in water becomes more prominent.

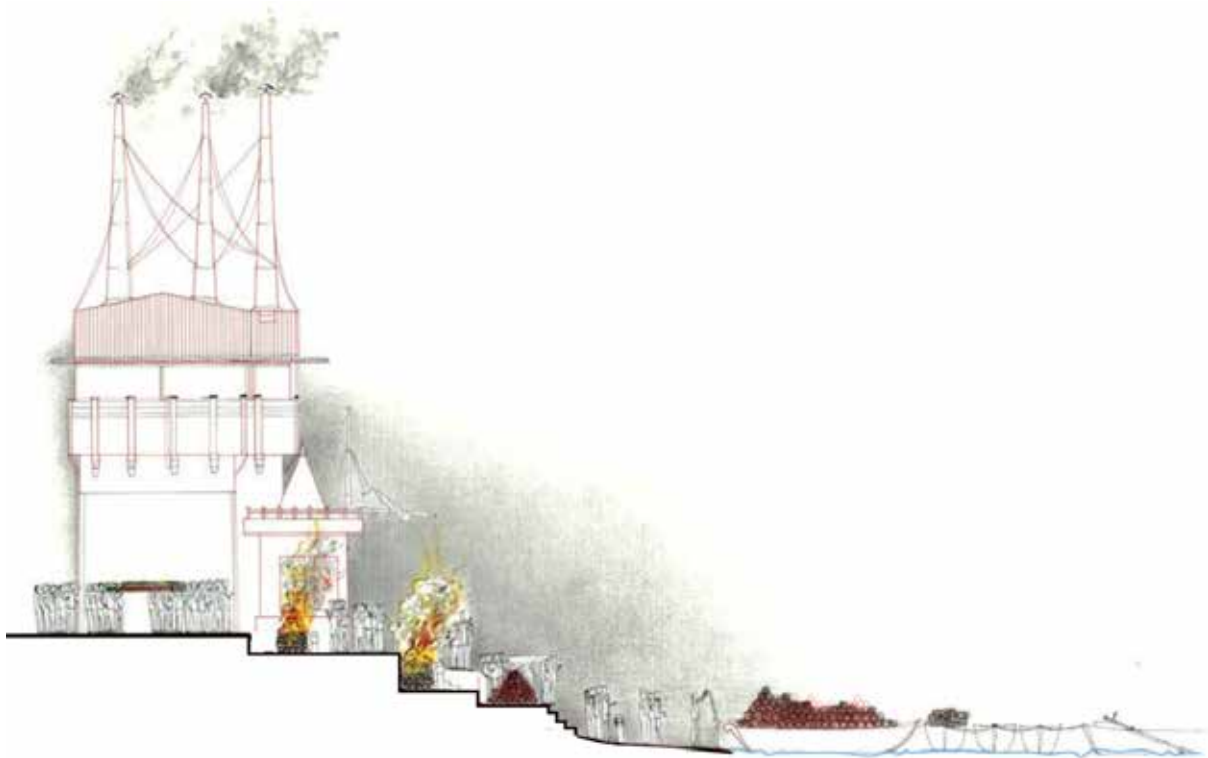


Fig 6.5 Manikarnika ghat- day



Fig 6.6 Manikarnika ghat night

6.5 CHILDHOOD MEMORY

The residents who have had this ghat as a backdrop for all their life remember their childhood days playing on the ghat. The burning pyres an everyday scene became a backdrop, a part of the routine.

The temples and streets with their varying enclosures made good places for playing hide and seek. They remember the different volumes where they used to hide and run, sit and chat. Unlike the usual emotion of peace or somberness or sadness painting the other images, the childhood memory of local residents is that of fun explorations.

The meaning of death is understood, and also accepted as a casual truth, like most locals of Banaras which allows them to move freely on the cremation ghat.

The image is of the temple and the streets where they played hide and seek, the temple railings where they used to sit and chat. The temple and street and steps created interesting mass-void places which were explored through the game, the varying enclosures make a strong impact on the memory.

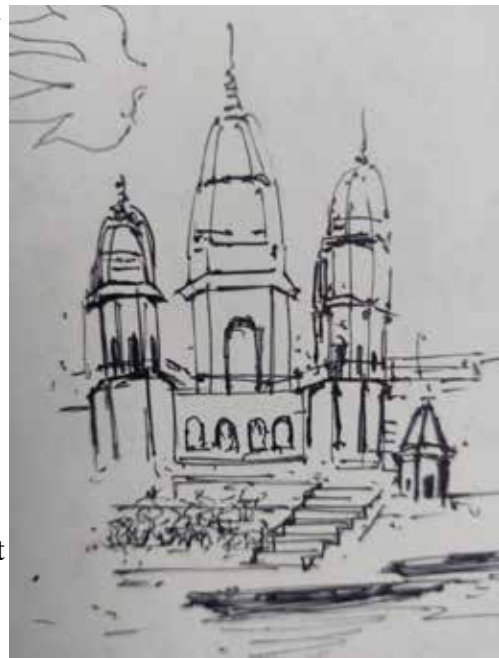


Fig 6.7 Sketch by respondent from memory



Fig 6.8 Collage of enclosures

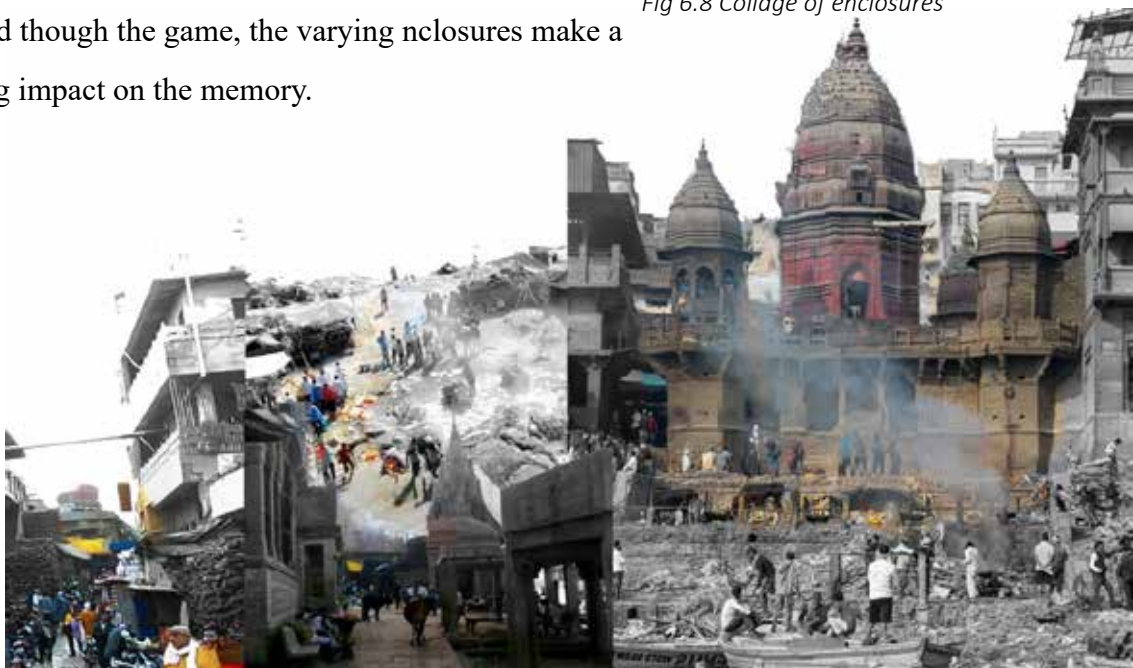


Fig 6.9 Collage of childhood memory as per narratives

6.6 SPATIAL GRAMMAR

The one quality of the ghats which is the most striking is the "timeless" quality, frozen moments, of things as they were, are and will be, everything else changes in and around it, different compositions result by different actions but the form in itself remains the same.

The theatre in Arles and the Pallazio della Ragione in Padua are two examples of artefacts that tend to coincide with the urbanisation process because they are not only defined by their context or by their original or previous functions, but also by the form that has allowed them to endure through various eras. These events add another layer on top, an independent layer to the existing formal order, which also adds to the experience. The analysis is done therefore of the built form and the activities.

Smoking fires, soot-covered structures, and stacks of wood stacked on boats and landings make Manikarnika Ghat easily identifiable. The basic shapes of bastions, balconies, aedicules, portals, pavilions, and platforms make up the ghat's design language. These forms come in a variety of sizes, materials, and configurations. The archetypal architectural components are randomly repeated, creating a syncopated rhythm and bringing the intricate visual structure together.

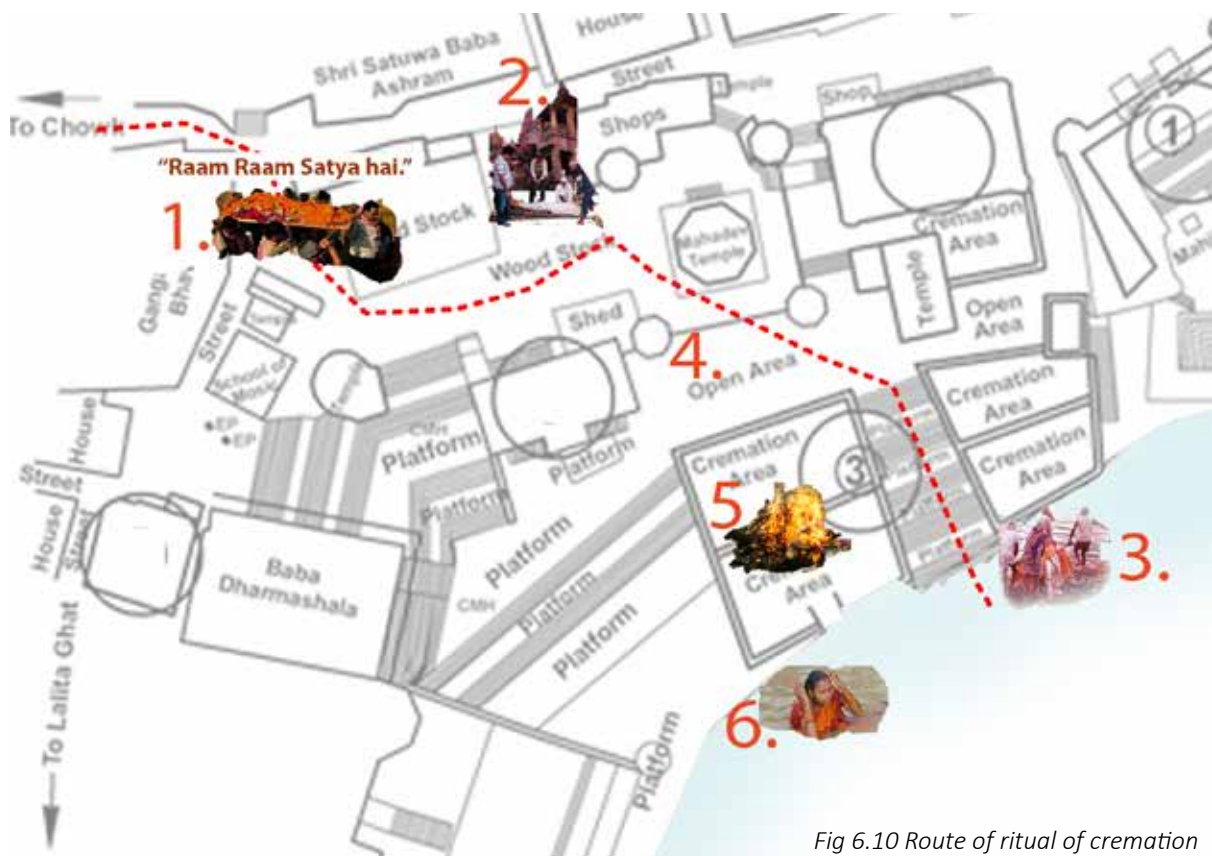


Fig 6.10 Route of ritual of cremation

1. To get to the ghat, mourners carry the deceased on their shoulders down narrow streets. The streets are filled with shops and boutiques, all carrying on their own tasks, eating, chatting, working.
2. The body is adorned in old historical buildings.
3. Through the stepped passage between the two sides of cremation, the body is carried to the river and is dipped in Ganged before burning- to wash away the sins.
4. The body is kept to dry in the open area dedicated to cremation.
5. Creamtion
6. Final bathing as per ritual

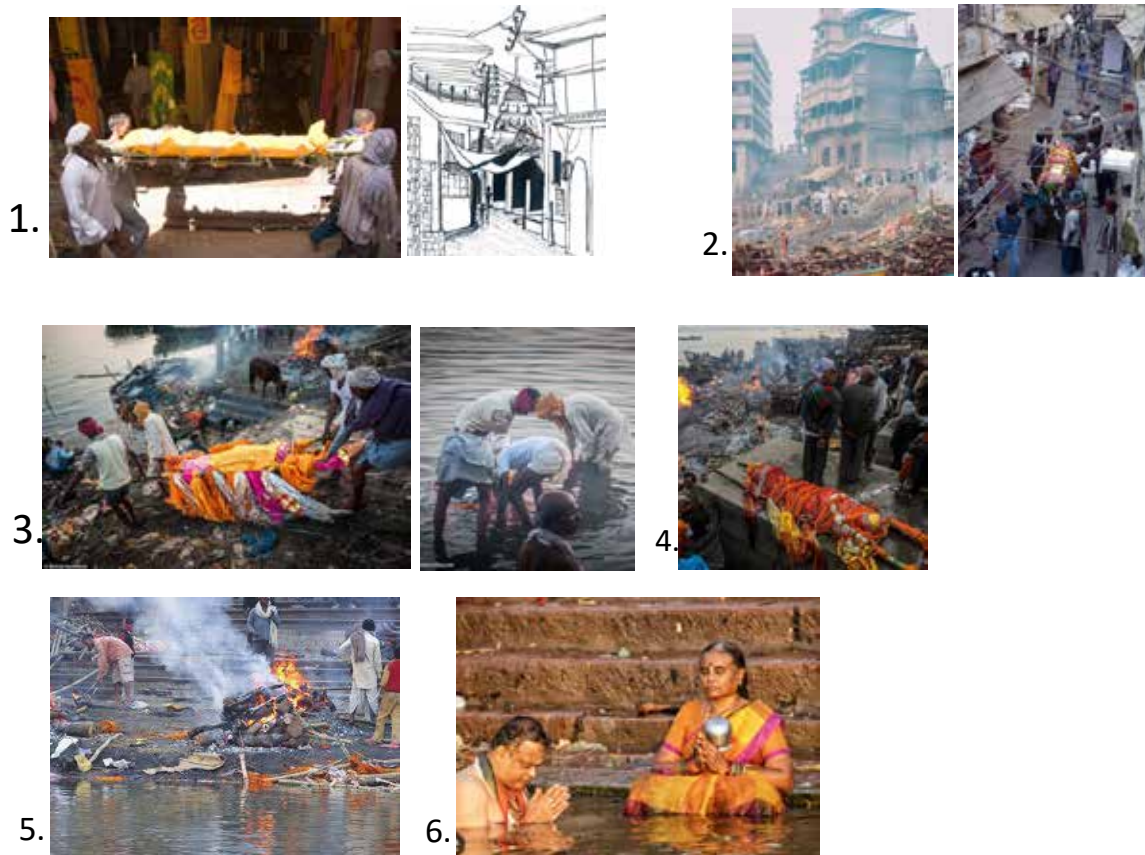


Fig 6.11 Photos of route of cremation
Source- TOI, Atlas Obscura, Third eye traveller

1. STEPS

The central stepped pathway is used only for movement. The cremation takes on the main levels. Casual onlookers sit on the platforms above the cremation or below near the water, a little further from where the bodies are bathed.

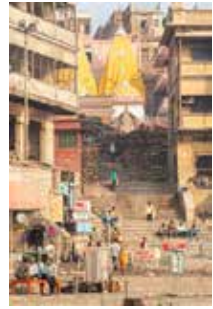
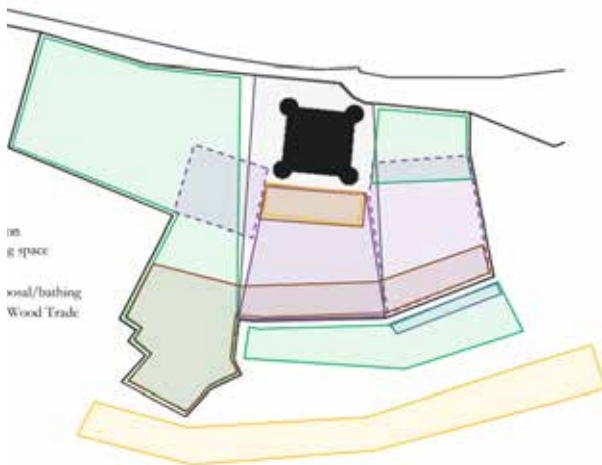


Fig 6.12 a. Highlighted area where people sit and watch b, c. Steps for movement



Fig 6.13 Section through steps



- Temple
- Cremation
- Gathering space
- Tourist
- Ash disposal/bathing
- Office/ Wood Trade

Fig 6.14 Schematic plan of activities
Source- A. Sinha



Fig 6.15 3d of ghat
Source- HCP

2. TERRACES

The cremation takes place on the wide stepped levels. Wood is also stacked here.



Fig 6.16 Section through terraces



Fig 6.17 Photos of terraces
Source - Youtube, The wire

6.7 LAND USE OF NEARBY CONTEXT

Manikarnika ghat is surrounded by multiple dharamshalas and ashrams. The route adjacent leads to Kashi Vishwanath temple. The ghat houses the Ratneshwar Mahadev Temple and the Tarkeshwar temple. The main commercial activity is that of selling wood. There are other shops selling eateries, paan etc.

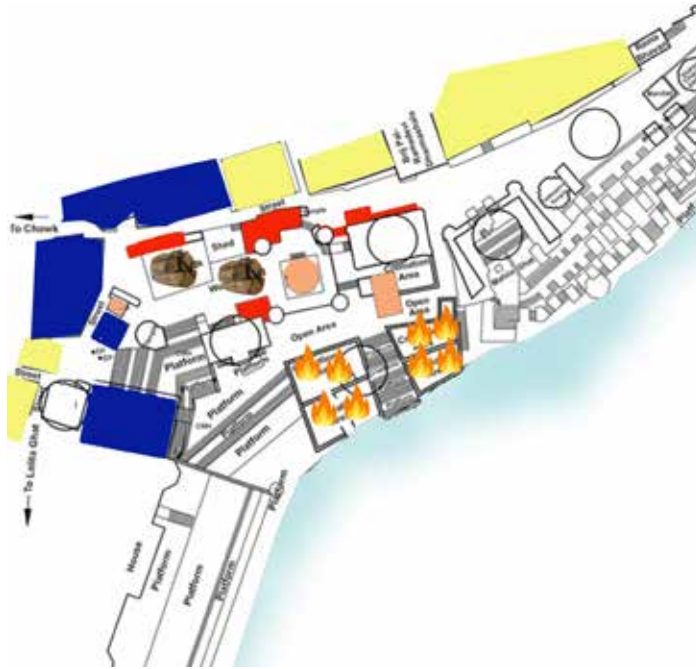


Fig 6.18 a,b - Land use around ghat

6.8 ASSOCIATIONS

LOCALS

MEANING- “DEATH IS THE ULTIMATE TRUTH.”



Fig 6.19 Collage of image due to accepted meaning as per narrayives

“Wo ek jagah hai jaha satya hai.” - Hotel manager who frequents this ghat

The locals have always believed that death is the ultimate truth. And one can attain moksh by dying on Manikarnika ghat. The loacls who sit here like to come here because unlike the other ghats, here there is no materialistic commercial activity. There is no show being put up for the tourists.

he ghat brings the realisation that everyone dies, it inspires and reminds them to be a good person for the limited time they spend on Earth and to not run after materialistic pleasures. The image of Manikarnika ghat is of the wooden stick striking the pyre setting it on fire and the ashes being poured into Ganga and merging and flowing away with it.

The meaning and narrative attached to death as per the myths brings an emotion of peace and acceptance in the image instead of sadness and fear. The idea of attaining moksh gives a sense of relief. The ghat without any vending or act-like- aarti makes it feel real(un-fake).

The sound smell and heat of fire, along with the strong visual of bodies burning creates an unforgettable memory.

2. TOURISTS:

Foreign Tourists visiting this ghat don't believe in the myths, but the powerful image of the flame against the dark sky and the reflection in the water becomes memorable with the idea of the elements of nature being one.

They prefer coming here at night without artificial or daylight. During the night, the noise is less, people sit quietly around and all that is heard is the sound of fire burning through bodies and lot of wood.

Fire makes for a very memorable image with its vision, sound, smell, temperature. Combined with water against a dark sky, the experience even without a religious association makes a strong impact. The universal narrative of death as a sad event makes it more real and concrete, brings a somberness to the memory.



Fig 6.20 a. Photo showing confluence of nature
b. Sectional collage showing confluence in place

2B. TOURISTS

“SELLING DEATH” (TOURIST- ASSOCIATION, MYTH V/S MEANING- LAYER)



Fig 6.21 Collage of image due to opposite of inherent meaning of death and commercialiszaion



Location of wood vending

I counted 18 fires, drums and bells. I see the Shiva temple. The bodies are just a leftover.

Death as a sad event is an inherent understanding. The commercialization of death and . The lack of sadness and casual somberness in family memebbers due to the myth of crying considered to be unlucky for the dead leaves the foreign tourists in shock.

The buying of wood, cheap or expensive, the quick swapping of bodies on the pyre, bodies just as leftovers all go against the pre conceived idea of death rituals/ ceremonies and leave everlasting impacts.

The image is of the roaring fire, and bodies in and out of it, wood being picked and brought.

2C. TOURISTS

“MULTI STOREY PARKING”

The stepped crematorium is described as a multi storey parking, the levels holding the pyres, a central corridor used as a route to the river.



Fig 6.23 Collage of built form as per narratives

6.7 MULTISENSORIAL ATTRIBUTES

At Manikarnika Ghat, cremation, an intended performance, is a spectacle. There is heightened awareness of the environment—heat and smoke from burning bodies is viscerally felt if one is close enough but distant views of the fires are also haptically felt in embodied perception. The surprising pleasantly smell of the burning pyres, the sound of the chants “Raam Raam Satya Hai.” and the cackling of the fire, wood being stacked, splash of water are all sounds that accompany the embodied image. The visual contrast of burning flame against the dark sky at night is striking and makes a memorable image.



Fig 6.24 multisensorial elements on ghat

Vision- Burning flame against the dark sky, soot covered buildings, stacked pyres

Sound - Wood burning, Raam Ram satya hai chants, wood being stacked, splash of water



7. ASSI GHAT:

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The southernmost ghat in Varanasi is called Assi Ghat. It is the largest and most well-known ghat in Varanasi. People go to Assi Ghat for a variety of reasons, including to experience the reverent ambiance, take in the famous evening aarti, and learn about the local way of life. Numerous Hindu texts, including the Kurma Purana, Matsya Purana, Padma Purana, and Agni Purana, make reference to this ghat.



Location of Dashashwamedh ghat ●
Location of Manikarnika ghat ●
Location of Assi ghat ●

7.2 SEQUENCING EVOLUTION



Fig 7.1 Greenland

One of the most prominent sites of the annual Panchkoshi Yatra, before the 19th century, the ghat was a greenland covered by trees and shrubs.



Fig 7.2 Old photo Source- British Library

When the queen of Bihar purchased the southern side in 1902 and built her castle, the territory was split into two. (Present-day hotel - Ganges view)



Fig 7.3 Assi Naala Source- TOI

The Assi river became Assi Naala as the city grew



Fig 7.4 Old photo Source- British Library

In the aftermath of Assi Nala being diverted a kilometer to the south in 1980, the Ganga flow has receded from Assi Ghat, leaving a large exposed silt area.



Fig 7.5 Assi ghat

A few other structures came into existence but it was only in 1988 that the ghat became pukka. Later it witnessed heavy construction around the area as more ashrams and businesses started flourishing.



Fig 7.6 Assi ghat

In 2014, the southern end of Assi ghat was converted into a stage like pavillion with Yagshala to host the “Subh-e-Banaras” was started.

A ghat that was barely visited by the locals due to the Assi Naala, has over time evolved to be one of the most visited spots for locals, as well as tourists

7.3 MEANING

The conceptual organisation of the religious world is significantly influenced by myths and symbols. Understanding the ghat, requires knowledge of its “sacred geography.” The culture’s cosmic worldview serves as a conceptual organising principle and aids the dweller and the visitor in making sense of the city.

Etymology- Assi naala → Assi Ghat

Hindu mythology claims that Goddess Durga hurled her sword after destroying the demons Shumbha and Nisumbha. The spot where the sword fell caused a river to form, which was later given the name Assi.



Fig 7.7 Illustration of battle

Another mythological story claims that Lord Rudra, a manifestation of Lord Shiva, got enraged at the Asuras and killed 80 of them here. This is how it acquired the name Assi, which is Hindi for “80.” Devotees claim that bathing at Assi Ghat, where the Ganga and Assi rivers converge, is similar to bathing at thousands of other sacred rivers.

Ritualistic Meanings:

Ganga Snaan on Assi ghat- Devotees claim that bathing at Assi Ghat, where the Ganga and Assi rivers converge, is similar to bathing at thousands of other sacred rivers.

Ganga Aarti- The Aarti happening here is considered to be holy and is a form of respect and gratitude to Ganga Ma.

Flowers floated in water - People float diyas (candle), with burning flickers and flowers in them as a symbol of hope and wishes

2. Spirtual/ religious meaning:

The river is Ganga Ma / manifestation of connection to the divine



Fig 7.8 Collage of Assi Ghat as per myths

MATERIAL:

Materials on Assi ghat:

Water –acts as a bridge between the cosmic and the real. In Banaras, the water of river Ganga is considered to be holy, redemptive. Despite the water being muddy or dirty it is thought of as purifying due to the meaning attached to it.

Stone – It gives a sense of permanence, the water washed against the stone steps and the left-over signs of vendors or people having occupied the platforms show the passing of time, the texture makes it seem earthy.

Sand - -Not intervened, - Softer connection to water , - The footsteps show passage of time



Fig 7.9 Material and meaning in Assi Ghat

7.4 TIME OF VISIT

The Ganga Aarti happens on this ghat at Sunrise, a surreal experience with the flame merging with the reds and yellows of the sky.

Post the aarti, the vendors set up and yoga sessions start as a part of Subah-e – Banaras.. After the yoga sessions, most people linger for a cup of tea with friends, to meet other new people or to just sit by the river.

On weekdays, after this , there are skating classes conducted on this ghat

By this time the vendors selling ritualistic commodities leave. The ghat now becomes quieter with many people sleeping under the pavilions, and some teenagers who are free come there with their friends.

At noon, the ghat is energetic, the activities become recreational and more tourists get involved in the life on ghat. The vendors set up on the periphery of the large open space selling cold water, ice creams and masala lemon tea.

The afternoons are again quieter and at 4-5 in the evening, BHU students come to the ghat to paint or spend time with friends. A lot of the locals and tourists come to this ghat just to sit by the river. The evening aarti happens at sunset where the vending stops momentarily and the entire ghat is involved in the single powerful act.

After the evening Aarti, the vending resumes with fast food and chaat items being sold. The pavillion sometimes hosts programs like kathas, dance performances etc.. Platforms are being used to pray, sell, bless people, sleep, rest, and change clothes before and after holy dips.

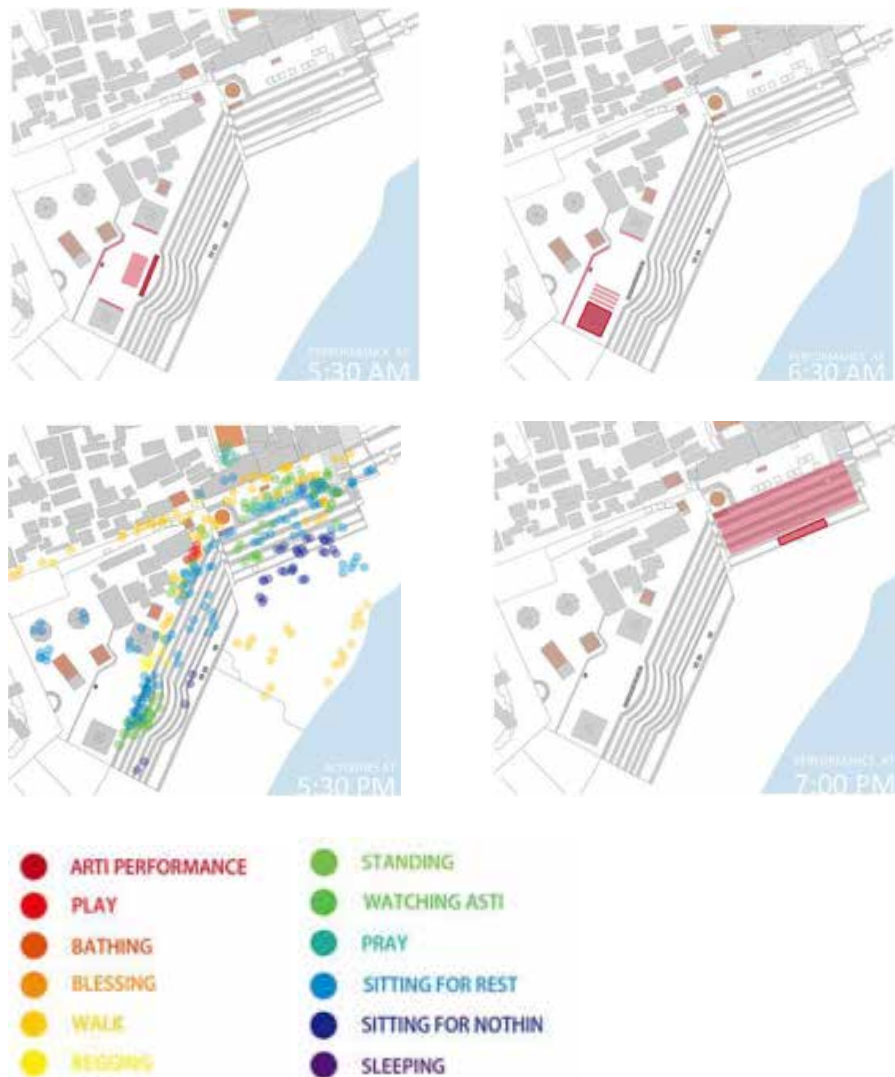


Fig 7.10 Activity Mapping in Assi Ghat
Base Source- A. Sinha

7.5 SPATIAL GRAMMAR

Steps:

- Material- Stone
- Meaning- medium of connection to river, therefore connecting the sacred with the humane.
- Climbing down the first set of stairs, one reaches the large platform. The sunken nature creates a peaceful space
- Activities supported – The platforms between the sets of steps are large. The entrance steps are used for movement, the steps near the water after the large ground are used mainly for sitting



Fig 7.11 Steps in plan

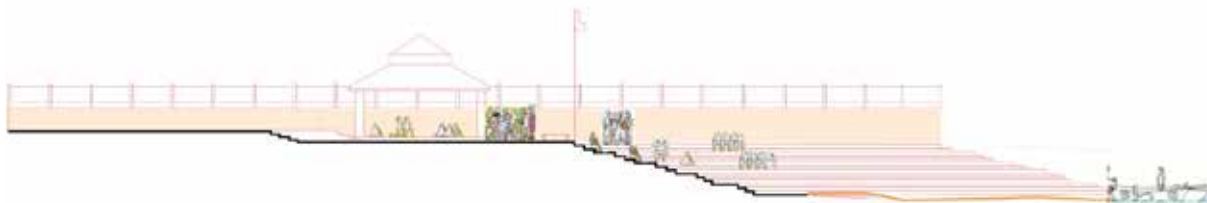


Fig 7.12 Steps and activity in section

Platforms

The large ground after entering is used for multiple purposes- skating, yoga, arti etc. In the evening the periphery of this level is surrounded by different kinds of vendors.

The smaller platforms between steps are used for the purpose of sitting.



Fig 7.13 Large ground space used for yoga, vending

Pavilion:

There are two pavilions, the central pavilion hosts musicians, kathas, dance performances etc.

The other pavilion is used for sitting during the day when it is hot, in the afternoon many people sleep here also.



Fig 7.14 Pavillions used throughout the day

Activity Location

Because the vending happens on the periphery of the ground, the steps after that provide an undisturbed view of the horizon. Because of the silt left behind by shifting of the Naala, there is not much vending happening near the water edge



Fig 7.15 Pan showing location of vending and distance from river

“VAST”

It is described across multiple narratives as being vast and endless. Compared to the other ghats, Assi ghat is a lot bigger because of which, it does not feel as dense, Even during the Aarti the soft breeze is felt. It is at the southern end of the stretch of the ghats. Because of this, it is not congested by surrounding ghats. The built form is limited, and is farther away from where people sit, because of which, the space feels more open



Fig 7.15 Google earth Images of all three ghats- Assi, Dashashwamedh, Manikarnika



Fig 7.15 Assi Ghat, Dashashwamedh ghat

ASSOCIATIONS:

2. ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE

The association of economic dependence gets translated to crowd in the embodied image-While the desity crowd of people is recognised through all the senses, in this association the visual sense of spotting potential customers plays the main role.



Fig 7.16 Collage of image due to economic dependence

3. SPIRITUAL BELIEF (MEANING).



Fig 7.17 Collage as a result of spiritual association

“We cant live without Ganga ma, we like to work here. I recently didnt come to work due to my daughter’s wedding for a week and felt very restless without seeing Ganga Ma ”

- Vendor selling flowers and diya

Ganga Ma, the holy River brings forth emotions of peace, faith and sense of life in the minds of those who believe it to be holy. The locals with a spiritual or religious association think of the river as Ganga Ma. The emotion of devotion establishes a meaningful relation with the place and the memory reflects this emotion in the image of flowing water - changing its colors across seasons- muddy in monsoons, white in winters and greenish in summers.

The water despite being dirty is not thought of as impure. It is considered to be pure and holy enough to drink it. Water in itself, even without any cultural association is the most potent image of the imagination with its texture, sound and quality of reflection. These qualities make the image more memorable.

The arti which creates a different atmosphere with the chants, clapping hands, smells of agar-bati and camphor, the smoke going up and the flame against the dark sky makes for a powerful image. This dynamic image due to the emotion of faith and devotion, makes the experience more meaningful and divine.

All festivals and weddings are celebrated by the river, as her blessings are considered to be auspicious.

The constant sounds of bells from temples and Har Har Mahadev after the Arti are also heard.

3. SPIRITUAL BELIEF (MEANING).

INVOLVED IN OTHER NON SPIRITUAL ACTIITES



Fig 7.18 Collage as a result of spiritual assocaition

Image- in the morning, the sky is a little red, due to the sunrise. the arti happening in a straight line, and the different arts like with dhoop, kapoor, agarbati, flowers. I New people from different backgrounds, subh e banaras, chai with friends.

LOCATION AND LANDUSE:

Assi Ghat is the southern end of the long stretch of ghats. It is easily accessible via Nagwa Road. It is the closest ghat to BHU which is hwy it is frequented by the students. The large smattering of surrounding cafes also becomes a point of attraction for them.

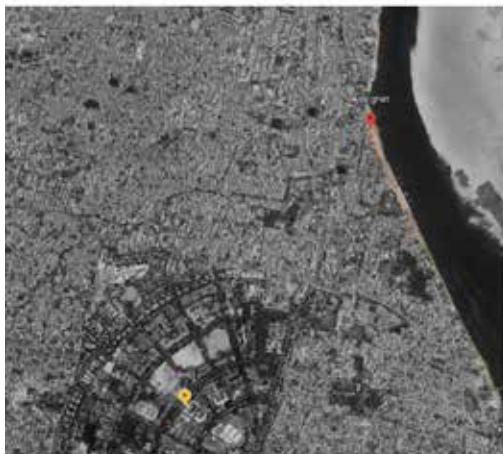



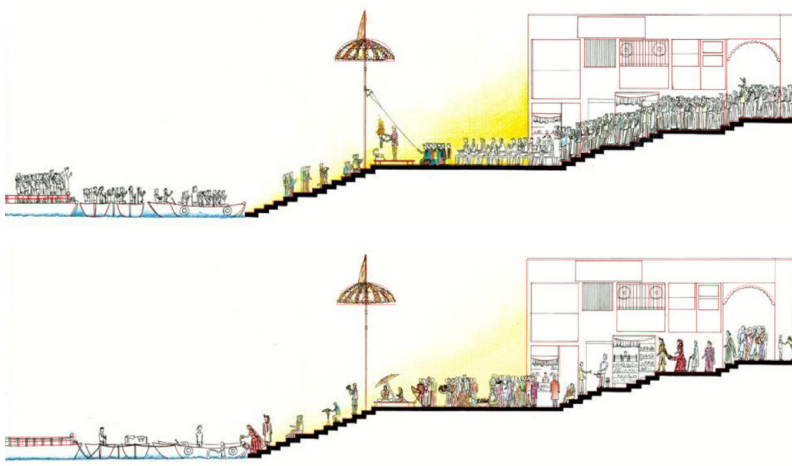





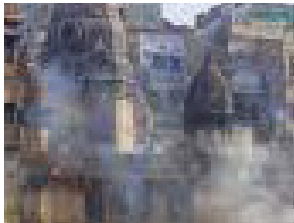
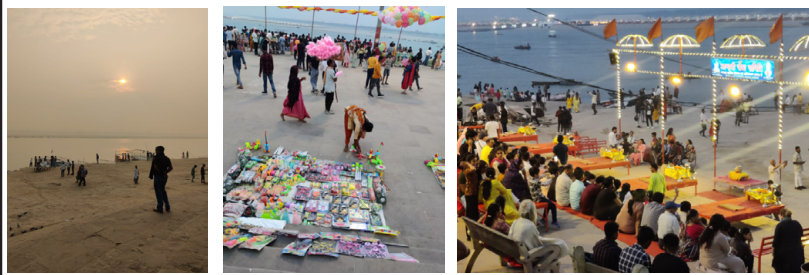
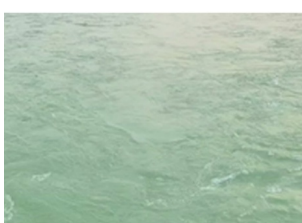

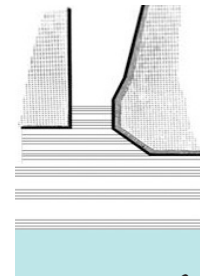


Fig 7.19 Google Earth images showing distance from BHU, cafes around Assi ghat

	Historical, mythological, religious significance	Childhood memory
DASHASHWAMEDH GHAT	<p><i>Mythological</i>- Place of the 10 horse sacrifice</p> <p><i>Religious</i> - Part of the panch-koshi tirth yatra, bathing here is considered to reap the benefits of the sacrifice</p> <p>- Location of the Ganga Aarti</p>	 <p>-Ghats as playscapes adds the emotion of carefree happiness to the current experience. The people for whom the ghat was not a place they frequented remember dirt in the water. The irony of women bathing naked in public in a place of religion that believes in covering up stands out.</p>
MANIKARNIKA GHAT	<p><i>Religious</i> - One who gets cremated here gets <i>moksha</i></p> <p>Place of Hindu cremation</p>	 <p>The childhood memory of residents for whom cremation is an everyday landscape, is of playing hide and seek in the varying enclosures of the temple and the street.</p> <p>Sketch drawn by respondent living on Manikarnika ghat.</p>
ASSI GHAT	<p><i>Religious</i>- Bathing at the Ganga and Assi rivers converge, is considered similar to bathing at thousands of other sacred rivers.</p>	 <p>Earlier the ghat was barely visited due to the Assi naalla, the kids living nearby used to come here and swim to the other edge that was greener and filled with wildlife to play.</p>

Time of visit	Material and meaning
 <p data-bbox="64 672 876 808">During the day, there are multiple different activities happening all over the ghat, but at the time of the Aarti the atmosphere changes with everyone involved in the single multisensorial act as one.</p>	<div data-bbox="893 168 1193 388">  <p data-bbox="893 388 1193 493">Water -Purifying, redemptive - Tranquil</p> </div> <div data-bbox="1218 168 1494 388">  <p data-bbox="1218 388 1494 577">Stone -Earthy, sense of permanence - Signs of life ingrained on surface show age</p> </div> <div data-bbox="933 598 1494 766">  <p data-bbox="933 766 1494 829">Orange and yellow backdrop - Warmth and vibrancy</p> </div>
 <p data-bbox="64 1249 876 1438">At night the flame against the dark sky becomes more spectacular. The surrounding ghats are quieter at day and in the absence of brightness of daylight, the confluence of natural elements of sky, fire and their reflection in water becomes prominent.</p>	<div data-bbox="901 903 1144 1165">  <p data-bbox="1193 913 1518 1102">Fire- in cremation it is the symbol of archetypal fire. -burns away the impurities</p> </div> <div data-bbox="893 1186 1185 1407">  <p data-bbox="1193 1186 1518 1375">soot covered buildings- sign of the cremation ritual that has been happening here since centuries</p> </div>
 <p data-bbox="64 1774 876 1921">The atmosphere during the morning is tranquil before the vending, people come here for a peaceful start. During the evening, multiple vendors surround the ghat with a students tourists and locals there for the Arti or to relax.</p>	<div data-bbox="893 1480 1193 1701">  <p data-bbox="1218 1501 1518 1606">Water -Purifying, redemptive - Tranquil</p> </div> <div data-bbox="893 1732 1193 1974">  <p data-bbox="1218 1764 1518 1963">Sand -Not intervened - Softer connection to water - The footsteps show passage of time</p> </div>



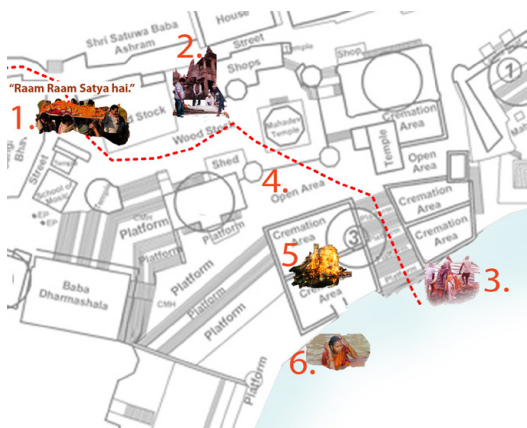
Entrance from Godowlia chowk - heavily dense street opens up to the horizon giving a sense of relief.



Marhis break the huge scale of the ghat and create enclosures between steps



Bamboo umbrellas become a prominent part of the backdrop



The levels of 3 metre height hold the burning pyres, described across narratives as similar to multi story terraces

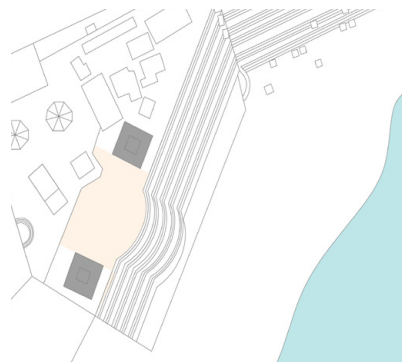


Central stepped pathway used mainly for movement

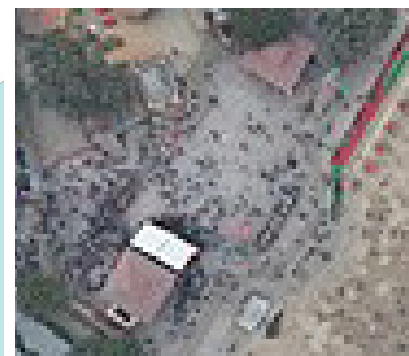
Cremation route - from street to ghat to the river



Water is an important part of the spatial grammar at Assi ghat. At the end of the line of ghats, it gets a vast view of the river, the horizon gives a sense of infinity



The large central space hosts subah - e Banaras, yoga classes, skating classes, and in evenings the periphery is covered by vendors . These activities by the water edge attract a lot of tourists as well as locals



	Multi sensorial and dynamic	Inferences
	<p>Smell- Agarbat, camphor , fire during aarti</p> <p>Sound - Aarti, moving vendors selling products, chattering sound</p> <p>Vision- Tall shikharas of temples in orange, colorful things being sold by vendors, flowing water, Aarti</p>	<p>Dashashwamedh ghat is different for different people. Being the location of the Ganga aarti, this ghat becomes the point of the most sacred ritual for the tourists. This significance added with its central location makes it popular. This popularity leads to the dynamic quality of the ghats with the vendors being attracted by the customers and vice versa. The childhood memory for the locals with the long term association of before the ghat became a tourist place adds an emotion of nostalgia to the current experience. The ghat is always active, always dynamic in nature but the experience of visitor varies during the time of the Aarti and otherwise- as an awe-striking performance of the Aarti or as a set of multiple vendors selling colorful items against the warm orange backdrop and the tranquil water, Materials on the ghat of water, fire have inherent meanings of purity and hope and faith which make the experience more impactful. The built form with facilitates the rituals and the image, the act of stepping down to the water is enriched by the enclosure of the marshes, the stage for the arti gives it a ritualistic importance, the orange of the temples creates a warm atmosphere, the dense street from Godowlia chowk enhance the release felt once the horizon is seen.</p>
	<p>Smell- Wood burning</p> <p>Sound - Wood burning, Raam Ram satya hai chants, wood being stacked, splash of water</p> <p>Vision- Burning flame against the dark sky, soot covered buildings, stacked pyres</p>	<p>Manikarnika ghat as a crematorium is a shared meaning for everyone but the meaning of death varies for the locals and the tourists. The common acceptance of death being the ultimate truth leads to a casualty in the experience of the people living on this ghat. A lot of the locals come here for recreational purposes. The economization of death with different types of wood and quick swapping of body on the pyres creates an emotion of surprise and disbelief for those who don't believe in this myth. The soot covered dark backdrop stands out in comparison to the surrounding red and brown colors.</p> <p>At day, the ghat is surrounded by different sounds and the natural light makes the fire less striking, but at night with the other ghats being quieter the experience of the flame against the dark sky and artificial lights becomes surreal. The built form is a result of the ritualistic route- carrying the body from the street, buying wood from the open patch of land before entering the ghat, stepping down to the river, climbing up to the levels to reach the pyre. The multi levelled space instead of the usual flat stretch of land makes a significant impact on the visual perception.</p>
	<p>Smell- Agarbat, camphor , fire during aarti</p> <p>Sound - Aarti, moving vendors selling products, chattering sound, gentle murmur of water</p> <p>Vision- horizon extending as far as the eye can see, clean reflective water, red sunrise, Aarti</p>	<p>Recently developed, and with a different set of activities being hosted on this ghat, it has quickly become popular. Easily accessible from the road, stepping down the entrance steps, the sunken nature creates a sense of getting away. Turning towards the water, the vastness and the horizon stretching infinitely till the lines between the sky and water vanishes is breathtaking. The large ground before the steps leading to the water hosts Aarti, yoga, skating etc. These activities allow different associations to form which leads to different images and a higher sense of belonging. The different activities also create different atmospheres of activity and quiet throughout the day.</p>

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