

## MAIN SECTION

# The Brand-new Riverfront and the Historical Centre: Narratives and Open Questions in Contemporary Ahmedabad, India

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## ABSTRACT

In 2002, the city of Ahmedabad (India) was profoundly shaken by severe interreligious riots. Subsequent years saw deep transformations in the image of the city and the consolidation of the right-wing Hindu nationalist party in the local and supra-local political arena. This article investigates some of the spatial manifestations of an urban transformation involving the valorization of historical heritage. The article focuses in particular on the large-scale Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project, which began in 2005 and remains ongoing, and on the inclusion of the historical center of Ahmedabad in the World Heritage List in 2017. The two developments have profoundly reshaped the image of the city and its river. The article offers an analysis of the city's transformations and of the related rhetoric promoted by the local governing coalition. It highlights the city's role in shaping a vision of a global, sustainable and historic metropolis.

## KEYWORDS

*Water Heritage; Displacement; Riverfront Development; Unesco World Heritage.*

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## 1 Introduction

In 2011, the Indian city of Ahmedabad celebrated its 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary and announced initiatives to valorize the history of the city, including heritage walks, theatre shows celebrating the city's past, and publications on Ahmedabad's history. The city was experiencing the most radical transformation since its industrial decline, both in economic and spatial terms. The largest riverfront project of India, the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project, was under construction, extending for around 10 kilometers in the core of the city, and several new residential and industrial developments were being built, mostly by private actors in the outskirts of Ahmedabad. It is in this context that the city center, located on the eastern side of the river, was proposed for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List by a local governing coalition led by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and supported by local professionals. UNESCO added the area to the list in 2017 [Figs. 1-2].

Drawing on recent theoretical work in critical geography and sociology of valuation, the article explores the simultaneous attention to the conservation of heritage and the development of large-scale projects promoted by the local governing coalition. The article analyzes how the governing coalition developed a new identity for the city after a period of traumatic events that included interreligious riots and attacks against the Muslim population. That violence has been extensively studied and this article includes a brief review of that literature in section 4.<sup>1</sup>

What image of the city has emerged from the combination of new large-scale developments and the simultaneous recognition of the historical significance of the city center? Who can find a place in this new vision for the city and who is excluded? In addressing these questions, the article focuses in particular on the period between 2010 and 2013. This was the period in which the main transformations of the riverfront took place and when the city celebrated its history to mark the 600th anniversary of its foundation in 1411. The article elaborates on part of the materials collected during two periods of fieldwork conducted in Ahmedabad in 2010-2011 and in 2012-2013, drawing in particular on in-depth interviews with architects, academics, lawyers, historians and public officers.

The article does not investigate the reasons behind the apparent absence of an organized conflict around the creation of the Sabarmati River Front

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1. The 2002 pogrom has been the object of a report by the Human Rights Watch, *"We have no order to save you": State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2002). An explicit accusation was written by the Gujarati lawyer Girish Patel, "Narendra Modi's One-Day Cricket Match", *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 48 (November 2002): 4826-4837. The violence was recalled also in the following years by Indian and international scholars, e.g. Achyut Yagnik and Suchitra Sheth, *The shaping of modern Gujarat* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005). See also, Tommaso Bobbio, "Making Gujarat vibrant: Hindutva, development and the rise of subnationalism in India," *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (Spring 2012): 657-672.



FIGS. 1-2 Localization of Ahmedabad and of its city center (source: Google Earth, Image © 2019 Digital Globe).

Development Project, which was the focus of a previous publication.<sup>2</sup> The photographs included in the following pages highlight the physical transformation of the riverfront and of the surrounding spaces between 2010 and 2013; not included are the visual materials that can be easily found on the UNESCO reports,<sup>3</sup> in numerous history of architecture and

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2. Gloria Pessina, "The 'Missing Conflict' of the Sabarmati Riverfront. Authoritarian Governance, Neoliberalism and Water in Ahmedabad, India," *PA.CO. Partecipazione e Conflitto* 11, no. 3, special issue *Ten years of PA.CO.*, edited by Alice Mattoni and Louisa Parks (December 2018): 692-716.

3. UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Historic City of Ahmadabad" (2017).

conservation studies,<sup>4</sup> as well as in the promotional materials of both the heritage city<sup>5</sup> and the riverfront.<sup>6</sup>

The next section lays out the theoretical framework used to answer the research questions, highlighting the complementarity between theories of critical geography and of sociology of valuation and introducing the theory of “heritization” elaborated in the anthropological debate by the English anthropologist Michael Herzfeld and others.<sup>7</sup> The third section focuses on the specific case of Ahmedabad, describing the context in which a new vision for the city was elaborated and how it was translated into development and conservation projects. The conclusion highlights Ahmedabad’s particularities with respect to other waterfront development projects, which are the object of recent and forthcoming studies. The conclusion also reflects on the ways in which the theories explored in the second section are helpful for understanding similar cases. It emphasizes the need to integrate theoretical perspectives in urban and heritage studies.

## 2 Theoretical framework

A city vision encompassing new large-scale projects and valorizing part of the existing heritage in Ahmedabad can be read from different perspectives. In critical geography, the American geographer David Harvey<sup>8</sup> and the American urban theorist Neil Brenner<sup>9</sup> see urban space as the “spatial fix” needed for the perpetuation of capitalism, that is, “a relatively fixed and immobile basis upon which capital’s circulation process can be extended, accelerated, and intensified.”<sup>10</sup> In the sociology of valuation, the French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2015, 2017) develop the notion of an “economy of enrichment,” by which the authors mean “the act of improving the value of something” and “the economic exploitation of the past.”<sup>11</sup>

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4. Rabindra Vasavada, “Evolving Scenario of Architecture in Gujarat: an overview”, *Seminar (India) Magazine* (1998). Yatin Pandya and Trupti Rawal, *The Ahmedabad chronicle, imprints of a millennium* (Ahmedabad: Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Environmental Design, 2002). Riyaz Tayyibji, *AMD. Ahmedabad* (New Delhi: Bloomsbury India, 2017). Priyanka Sheth, Tanvi Jain, Riyaz Tayyibji, *Stepwells of Ahmedabad – Exhibition at Yale Architecture* (Ahmedabad: Anthill Design, 2018). Jigna Desai, *Equity in Heritage Conservation. The Case of Ahmedabad, India* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019).

5. Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, “World Heritage City Amdavad” (2017).

6. Sabarmati River Front Development Corporation Ltd (SRFDCL), “Sabarmati Riverfront. Reconnecting Ahmedabad to its River” (2014).

7. Michael Herzfeld, *Evicted from Eternity: The Restructuring of Modern Rome* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009). Id., “Engagement, Gentrification, and the Neoliberal Hijacking of History,” *Current Anthropology* 51, no. S2 (October 2010): 259-67.

8. David Harvey, *The urbanization of capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). Id., *The condition of postmodernity. An enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

9. Neil Brenner, “Global Cities, Glocal States: Global City Formation and State. Territorial Restructuring in Contemporary Europe”, *Review of International Political Economy*, 5, no.1 (Spring 1998): 1-37. Id., *New state spaces. Urban governance and the rescaling of statehood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

10. Id., “Global Cities,” 34.

11. Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, “Grappling with the Economy of Enrichment”, *Valuation Studies*, 3, no.1 (Fall 2015): 76. Id., *Enrichissement: une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

Harvey recalls the theories by the French philosopher and geographer Henri Lefebvre<sup>12</sup> in his work on the condition of postmodernity<sup>13</sup> and stresses that the “production of space” should be considered both in material and immaterial terms. Drawing on Karl Marx’s classic works, Harvey describes the production of space as a necessity within capitalism, since its survival depends on the existence of a variety of physical and social infrastructures. Moreover, the built environment itself, defined by Harvey as a “capital spatial fix,”<sup>14</sup> guarantees profits to those with privileged access to it, by providing opportunities to direct the surpluses of the capitalist economy to further spatial development and thus avoiding the crisis towards which capitalism would tend, i.e. the over accumulation of capital followed by devaluation. Each socio-spatial configuration is therefore constantly dynamic, as Harvey explains in his book *The Urbanization of Capital*: “the inner contradictions of capitalism are expressed through the restless formation and re-formation of geographical landscapes. This is the tune to which the historical geography of capitalism must dance without cease.”<sup>15</sup>

In line with Harvey’s theories, Brenner has also focused on the built environment and in particular on science parks, financial centers, waterfronts, Special Enterprise Zones and other large-scale developments, defined as “new state spaces”<sup>16</sup> in order to underline the relevant role played by government authorities in their creation. Even though much of the literature about globalization and world cities has tended to depict states as weak actors losing their power in a growing “space of flows,”<sup>17</sup> Brenner argues that the state is actually just “re-scaling,”<sup>18</sup> that is, changing its (spaces of) action, as suggested by Lefebvre<sup>19</sup> and as further elaborated by the Belgian geographer Erik Swyngedouw.<sup>20</sup> In Brenner’s view, “cities throughout the world economy are being promoted by their host states as locational nodes for transnational capital investment”<sup>21</sup> and the case of Ahmedabad is not an exception to this trend.

Critical geographers mostly refer to new spatial developments promoted by local and national governments as exceeding capital flows. To understand a case in which the creation of new urban spaces goes hand in

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12. Henri Lefebvre, *The production of space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

13. Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*.

14. Id., *The urbanization of capital*.

15. Ibid., 150.

16. Brenner, *New state spaces*.

17. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

18. Brenner, “Global Cities.”

19. Lefebvre, *The production of space*.

20. Erik Swyngedouw, “Authoritarian governance, power, and the politics of rescaling”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18 (2000): 63-76. Id., “Globalization or ‘Glocalization’? Networks, Territories and Rescaling”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17, no.1 (2004): 25-48.

21. Brenner, “Global Cities,” 3.



FIG. 3 Map of Ahmedabad and of its surroundings in 1866 (source: The British Library @ Flickr Commons. File from the "Mechanical curator collection").

hand with the valorization of heritage, it is also helpful to consider works by Boltanski and Esquerre on the economy of enrichment, including the social construction of the value and the price attributed to objects, including the built environment, as well as the impact of such an economy on different social classes.

The economy of enrichment is the term used by the authors "to refer to the forms of wealth creation that are based on an economic exploitation of the past, in the form of craft, heritage, tradition, identity or, more largely, culture."<sup>22</sup> Following the approach of the Indian-American anthropologist Arjun Appadurai to the "social life of things,"<sup>23</sup> the authors reflect on the social construction of value, highlighting the relationship between critical socio-economic moments and the simultaneous need to valorize the past

22. Boltanski and Esquerre, "Grappling with the Economy of Enrichment," 76.  
 23. Arjun Appadurai (ed.). *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

(e.g. creation of a “France” brand, made of castles and expensive wine and cheese in a moment of crisis in the late 1980s and again at the beginning of the 21st century). Interestingly, Boltanski and Esquerre observe that the promotion of “the memorial force of things,” including that of historical buildings and urban areas, depends on the creation of “value narratives focused on traditions, genealogies, identities and pedigrees”,<sup>24</sup> which can be appropriated and promoted by nationalist parties in the political arena, as seems to have happened in Ahmedabad [Fig. 3].

Boltanski and Esquerre highlight different social actors taking advantage of the past and marketing it, or, on the other end of the spectrum, being affected by such actions, through gentrification, for instance. In their view, a rising “patrimonial class” has an interest in recognizing the value of their historical assets with the support of experts such as historians, architects, art critics and communication specialists. Meanwhile, the part of the population traditionally active in historical centers tends to be displaced and dispossessed of its own past through processes of gentrification and eviction.

Similarly, the Italian anthropologist Chiara De Cesari and the Macedonian anthropologist Rozita Dimova<sup>25</sup> highlight the increasingly close relationship between heritage valorization - or heritagization, as defined by Herzfeld<sup>26</sup> - and gentrification, stressing how such processes tend to affect the most vulnerable members of the population (in terms of class, religion, race and gender), who often end up being displaced and losing their main sources of livelihood. Even though the controversial effects of heritagization have been already shown by some scholars,<sup>27</sup> De Cesari and Dimova notice that the simultaneous processes of heritage valorization and gentrification, as well as the role of various institutional, private and professional actors within these processes, have not been adequately studied, especially by urban and heritage scholars.

Helping to fill the gap in the urban studies literature on the relation between heritage valorization and increasing urban inequalities, this article considers the relationship between the creation of new state spaces<sup>28</sup> such as the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project, and the economy of enrichment<sup>29</sup> resulting from the valorization of the historical center. These

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24. Boltanski and Esquerre, “Grappling with the Economy of Enrichment,” 79.

25. Chiara De Cesari and Rozita Dimova, “Heritage, gentrification, participation: remaking urban landscapes in the name of culture and historic preservation”, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25, no. 9 (2019): 863-869.

26. Michael Herzfeld, “Engagement, Gentrification,” 259-67.

27. Richard Florida, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle-Class—And What We Can Do about It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017). Herzfeld, Michael. *Evicted from Eternity*. Id., “Engagement, Gentrification.” Salvatore Settis, *If Venice Dies*, translated by André Naffis-sahely (New York: New Vessel Press, 2016). Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The death and life of authentic urban places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

28. Brenner, “Global Cities.”

29. Boltanski and Esquerre, *Enrichissement*.

two processes, which resulted in gentrification and displacement for the most marginal parts of the local population, proved to be part of the same political vision, a vision promoted mostly by the right-wing Hindu nationalist party (BJP) not only for the city but also for the whole state of Gujarat and, more recently, for the entire Indian nation, ruled since 2014 by Narendra Modi. The BJP leader, who was confirmed as the guide of the nation in 2019, started his career in Gujarat and became known across India for making Ahmedabad an aspiring global city with a historic heart, gaining the support especially of the rising Hindu middle class. How the two processes of development and heritage conservation have been intertwined in Ahmedabad and who has been excluded from such processes will be the object of the next section of the article.

### **3 A “new state space” at the heart of Ahmedabad: the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project**

The governing coalitions have justified the development of the Sabarmati riverfront and the valorization of the historic city center of Ahmedabad with a variety of narratives, including those about a need for development to compete with other global cities, about a need to protect the population from both natural hazards and social disorders, and those involving purity and cleanliness, which has been strongly bound to tradition, heritage valorization and religion. Such narratives contributed to a new image for Ahmedabad, but also were promoted on a larger scale. Narendra Modi, who served as Gujarat’s Chief Minister from 2002 to 2014, drew on these narratives in initiatives such as the Vibrant Gujarat biennial summit. The summit, aimed at mixing “culture with commerce, trade with tradition, enterprise with entertainment,”<sup>30</sup> was imagined since its inception in 2003 as a showcase of investment opportunities and heritage valorization,<sup>31</sup> both in material and immaterial terms, and it took place during Uttarayam, one of the most important Hindu festivals of Gujarat.

Around the time the Vibrant Gujarat summit started, the state also began promoting new investment opportunities through the creation of Special Economic Zones, Special Investment Regions and other new state spaces.<sup>32</sup> In Ahmedabad, the narrative around development and global competition was materializing in a major urban infrastructure: the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project. Conceived in the early 1960s by the

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30. The sentence is taken from the Vibrant Gujarat website managed by the government of Gujarat. The website makes reference to the first summit, in 2003, quoted in Desai, “The Globalizing City in the Time of Hindutva: The Politics of Urban Development and Citizenship in Ahmedabad, India,” PhD dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 2010): 73.

31. Renu Desai, “Entrepreneurial Urbanism in the Time of the Hindutva. City Imagineering, Place marketing, and Citizenship in Ahmedabad,” in *Urbanizing Citizenship. Contested spaces in Indian cities*, edited by Renu Desai and Romola Sanyal (London: SAGE Publications, 2012b), 31-57. Mona Luxion, “Nation building, Industrialisation, and Spectacle: Political Functions of Gujarat’s Narmada Pipeline Project,” *Water Alternatives* 10, no. 2 (June 2017): 208-232.

32. Brenner, *New state spaces*.



## SABARMATI RIVERFRONT DEVELOPMENT PROJECT



FIG. 4 The Concept Plan of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project (source: [www.sabarmatiriverfront.com](http://www.sabarmatiriverfront.com))

French architect Bernard Kohn, the project was redesigned at the end of the 1970s by the office led by the Indian architect Hashmuk Patel (HCP), based in Ahmedabad. Both proposals remained on paper until the late 1990s, when a special governing body—the Sabarmati River Front Development Corporation Ltd (SRFDCL)—was created by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) to manage an updated and extended version of the riverfront’s project.<sup>33</sup>

The new project was elaborated by the Environmental Planning Collaborative (EPC), a team of experts involving several members of the HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd and led by the architect Bimal Patel.<sup>34</sup> The proposal consisted in a ten-kilometer long redesign of the portion of the river within Ahmedabad’s boundaries. Concrete embankments would be created to protect the city from floods and the river bed would be narrowed (from 600-300 m to 275 m), resulting in the reclamation of vast amounts of land (160 ha., later increased to 200 ha.) to allow the development of new private buildings and public facilities [Fig.4].

The main narratives behind the proposal elaborated by EPC between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s revolved around development, sanitation and safety against floods. Rhetoric related to the valorization of culture and heritage was introduced in subsequent years, when the major infrastructural works were already at an advanced stage. In particular, the protection against flood risk has been highlighted as the main reason behind the design choice to construct RCC diaphragm walls (10-20 m depth) and anchor slabs (10 m), sustaining the lower promenade and RCC retaining walls (2.5 - 9 m), on top of which the upper promenade could be developed. The construction of the riverfront, which started in 2007, was anticipated in 2005 by the creation of a syphon north of Ahmedabad,

33. For further information about the contents of the earlier versions of the project and the context in which they were formulated see: Gloria Pessina, “Sustainable for whom? Projects and opinions on the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad”, final report, Movin’UP/GAI and Vastu Shilpa Fellowship (Ahmedabad: Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design, 2011), and id., “The ‘Missing Conflict,’” 692.

34. EPC, *Proposal for the Sabarmati Riverfront Development* (Ahmedabad: Environmental Planning Collaborative, 1998).

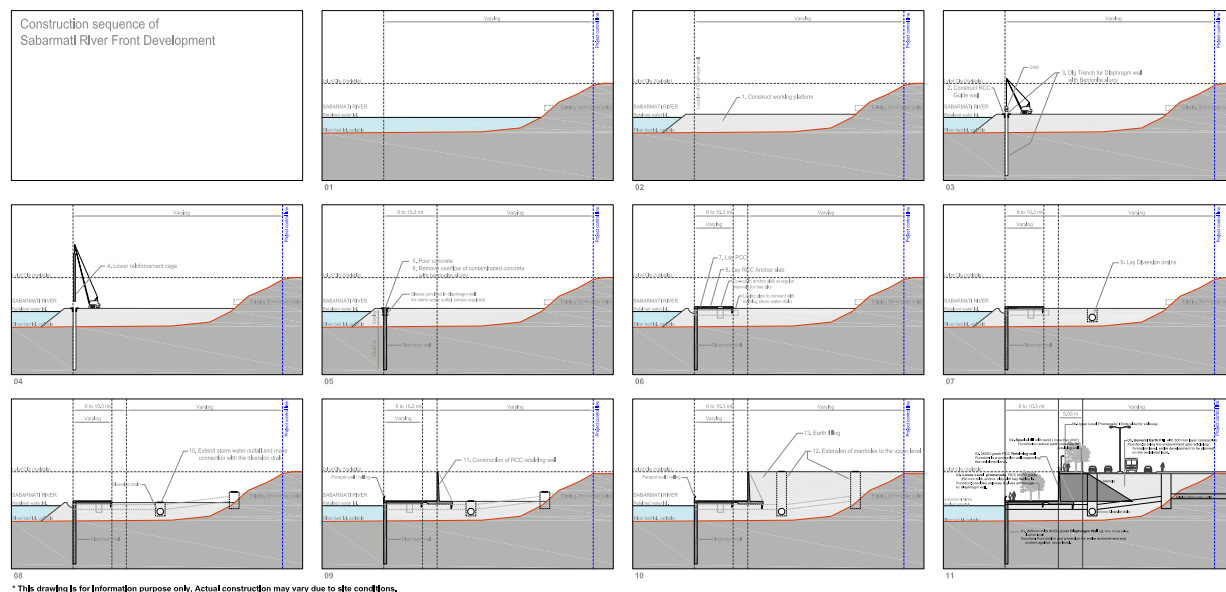


FIG. 5 The construction sequence of the Sabarmati riverfront, highlighting the changing section of the river (source: www.sabarmatiriverfront.com)

through which part of the water from Gujarat’s main canal (Narmada Canal) was diverted to the once almost dry riverbed of the Sabarmati, thus deeply transforming the river and its possible uses<sup>35</sup> [Fig.5].

The legitimacy of the project, which officially was aimed at reducing flood risk, was questioned by several experts, such as Prof. Rabindra Vasavada, Head of the Centre for Conservation Studies at CEPT university, interviewed by the author of this article in January 2011: “Floods are unlikely to happen but in case they will take place the covering of the riverbanks with concrete will affect the capacity of a large part of the city to absorb water and let it percolate in the soil. Moreover, the channelizing of the river for such a long stretch will affect negatively the areas both upstream and downstream of Ahmedabad where the flood will be more violent. Ultimately such sort of canal will act as a funnel.”<sup>36</sup> This opinion, shared by other urban studies scholars, designers and landscape architects,<sup>37</sup> is mostly based on the recognition of the shifting riverbed, previously characterized by a varying breadth between 600 and 300 meters, and of the inconsistent nature of the Sabarmati, fed by uneven amounts of rain during the monsoon and dry for much of the year, especially after a dam was erected in the 1970s to regulate the river’s flow [Fig. 6].

35. Gloria Pessina, “Società idrauliche’ contemporanee: uno sguardo sul Gujarat, India,” in *Acqua universale. Promesse e prospettive di una risorsa*, edited by Bianca Dendena (Milan: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 2018). Id., “The Missing Conflict.”

36. Id., “Sustainable for whom?,” 31.

37. CEPT University, “CEPT Interactive Workshop. Final Report” (CEPT University, 2009). Piyas Choudhuri, “Re-structuring the development along a non-perennial river. Case: Sabarmati river”, MSc thesis (CEPT University, 2009). Mohan S. Rao, “Sabarmati Riverfront Development. An Alternate Perspective”, *LA Journal of Landscape Architecture*, 36 (2012): 70-73. Amruta Pradhan, “Riverfront Development Project in India: Cosmetic Make-Up on Deep Wounds”, *SANRRP* (17 September 2014).



FIG. 6 Land reclamation and construction of RCC retaining walls along the Sabarmati river. View from Gandhi bridge towards the South (photo: Mariana Félix Paisana, 2013).

The reclaimed land was meant to have been used in part as private residential and tertiary developments (15-20%) to pay back the public investment by national and local authorities, as well as for the creation of two major roads (30%), gardens (26%), promenades (6%) and for other public facilities.<sup>38</sup> As stated by arch. Bimal Patel in an interview in December 2010: "Most people in Ahmedabad don't have open spaces to go to. And they say that the few parks that we have are really crowded by people, you know, using them. Basically, we are adding the number of open spaces."<sup>39</sup> The need for open space was justified by the designer of the project through a variety of past and present models of riverfront developments: "Paris of course, New York and Cheng Du in China and Shanghai and lots of places [...]. If you take a look at the sort of problems that they had in London in the 1850s [...], gutter flowing into the river, sewage, no space to walk, etc. Things like these are what made them transform their cities."<sup>40</sup> [Figs. 7-8]

38. Recent data show how the project was mostly financed by public bodies, i.e. the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) with US\$69 million and the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) with US\$74 million. The remaining US\$40 million were sold by the SRFDCI in share capital, see also: Chirayu Bhatt, "Reclaiming the Sabarmati Riverfront," in *Regenerating Urban Land. A Practitioner's Guide to Leveraging Private Investment*, edited by Rana Amirtahmasebi, Mariana Orloff, Sameh Wahba and Andrew Altman (Washington: The World Bank, 2016), 251.

39. Pessina, "Sustainable for whom?," 48.

40. *Ibid.*, 54.



FIG. 7



FIG. 8

*Fig. 7 and 8 Picture taken at the inauguration of the exhibition of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project at CEPT University on December 18, 2010. The visualizations show the nature of the public spaces imagined along the riverfront, e.g. gardens and promenades in a context of rapid real estate development (photo: Gloria Pessina, 2010).*

According to Shirley Ballaney, Senior Principal Planner of EPC/HCP Design and Project Management Pvt. Ltd, the design of public spaces of that kind (parks, gardens, promenades etc.) is part of the British colonial legacy in Indian cities such as Ahmedabad: "When the British came, the idea of parks and gardens came with them. Having a park was not a notion in Indian culture. Perhaps in the past it was the bazaar or the street or whatever, but we have inherited modern British town planning and the parks are part of it."<sup>41</sup> Other voices, such as Yatin Pandya, former director of the Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design and director of Footprints E.A.R.T.H. at the time of the interview (November 2010) underlined the inner contradictions of such assumptions and on their translation in the design of public spaces along the new riverfront: "I have a problem with the idea that the riverbanks were an unattended backyard. Actually, even if there was no water, several activities took place there: a circus, cultivation, dying of clothes, markets etc. Just

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41. Ibid., 48.



FIG.9



FIG. 8

*Fig. 9 and 10 The Sunday market continued to take place during the construction of the riverfront and was one of the main economic activities for the poorest strata of the population (photo: Gloria Pessina, 2011).*

look at the pictures of Henri Cartier Bresson!<sup>42</sup> Now the riverbanks are claimed as public, but actually there isn't any form of appropriateness to culture"<sup>43</sup> [Figs. 9-10].

The dominant rhetoric of the initial phases of the Sabarmati riverfront project - composed by a mix of narratives around global competition, national interest, urban development, security, and accessible public spaces - was translated into powerful images (Figure 6 and 7), publicly displayed when

42. The French photographer Henri Cartier Bresson documented the city of Ahmedabad and the Sabarmati river in 1966. Some of his shots can be found in "Henri Cartier-Bresson - INDIA. 1966", available online at: <https://pro.magnumphotos.com/Catalogue/Henri-Cartier-Bresson/1966/INDIA-1966-NN146183.html>, accessed June 10, 2019.

43. Pessina, "Sustainable for whom?," 48-49.



FIG. 11 One of the last slum pockets left along the Sabarmati during the construction of the riverfront in 2011. The land was reclaimed soon after (photo: Gloria Pessina, 2011).

the works were already at an advanced stage. The aim was to give “a memorable identity to Ahmedabad,”<sup>44</sup> through “strong visuals that don’t need any words.”<sup>45</sup> What such images tended not to show was the impact of a “new state space”<sup>46</sup> such as the riverfront on the weakest strata of the population, even though the initial plans made explicit reference to the slum dwellers who were not only living, but also working, in the informal economy in the proximity of the river. The narrative around security encompassed also the life of the slum dwellers who, on one hand, would have been exposed to flood risk, and on the other hand, would have contributed to the pollution of the river through their activities.

Even though some alternative design projects tried to show the possible coexistence between the presence of informal housing or informal economic activities and a non-perennial riverbed,<sup>47</sup> the AMC, the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority (AUDA) and the SRFDCL took the chance to relocate part of the former slum dwellers in new public housing compounds financed through the national Basic Services for the Urban Poor (BSUP) program which was included in the first edition of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM 2005 – 2012). The standard housing unit consisted of 28 sq. meters with water supply, sewerage and electricity connections,<sup>48</sup> but posed some issues in terms of

44. S. Ballaney in *ibid.*, 48)

45. Patel, “Narendra Modi.”

46. Brenner, “Global Cities.”

47. Choudhuri, “Re-structuring the development.” Rao, “Sabarmati Riverfront Development.”

48. MHUPA (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India), “Modified Guidelines for Sub-Mission on Basic Services to the Urban Poor (BSUP), Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)” (New Delhi: Government of India, 2009).

uses of the domestic space, of distance from the initial housing location and of affordability.<sup>49</sup> [Fig. 11]

As recalled by one of the most engaged advocates of the weakest strata of the population, the lawyer Girish Patel, main promoter of a Public Interest Litigation against the displacement of the urban poor,<sup>50</sup> “even if slum dwellers and the poor in general are considered also in the dominant rhetoric, often to justify the project, we want to stress the issue of livelihood beyond mere housing provision. Once you commercialize the river, the poor will be incongruous with the surroundings, that’s why the slum dwellers got displaced. So, our prayer was very limited: don’t displace them without providing them with alternative adequate accommodation. But the point is: what type of accommodation are you giving? What about the animals they have? You cannot ask them to stay at the fourth floor, as they cannot take their goats and sheep upstairs. Another issue regards the price of these houses: why should they make people beggars? And finally: if you displace them and relocate them in an area inhabited by poor people and far from the river they will not work, at all.”<sup>51</sup>

As shown in an in-depth study of the condition of the urban poor in Ahmedabad,<sup>52</sup> the displacement of slum dwellers due to the construction of major development projects affected a large number of the local population: 11.000 families were displaced due to the construction of the Sabarmati riverfront and around 3.000 for other large scale projects in the city (Kankaria Lakefront project; BRTS; further road widening works). Most of the relocation sites were located at a distance between 4 and 9 kilometers from their original sites of the slums and in former industrial areas in the East [Fig. 12]. These areas were often contaminated and presented issues regarding water availability and quality, thus leading to what the Indian urban planner and theorist Renu Desai<sup>53</sup> defined “infrastructural violence”, which adds to the loss of informal jobs for many former slum dwellers, especially women, when relocated far away from any job opportunity.

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49. The BSUP financing pattern is the following: Central Government (50%), State Government (20%), AMC/AUDA and the beneficiaries (30%). The beneficiaries share cannot exceed 12%, see also: MHUPA, “Modified Guidelines.”

50. For more information about the engagement of Girish Patel, who died at 85 in 2018 and was one of the main promoters of the Public Interest Litigation against the displacement of the slum dwellers in Ahmedabad see the various works by Renu Desai on the issue listed in the references. More on the topic can be found in Navdeep Mathur, “On the Sabarmati riverfront: Urban planning as totalitarian governance in Ahmedabad.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no.47/48 (December 2012): 64. Darshini Mahadevia, Renu Desai and Viyas Suchita, “City Profile: Ahmedabad.” Working Paper, n.26 (September 2014), Centre for Urban Equity, CEPT University (2014).

51. Pessina, “Sustainable for whom?,” 45.

52. Mahadevia et al., “City Profile: Ahmedabad.”

53. Renu Desai, “Urban Planning, Water Provisioning, and Infrastructural Violence at Public Housing Resettlement Sites in Ahmedabad, India,” *Water Alternatives* 11, no.1 (2018): 86-105. Id., “Municipal Politics, Court Sympathy and Housing Rights: A Post-Mortem of Displacement and Resettlement under the Sabarmati Riverfront Project, Ahmedabad.” Working paper, n. 23, Centre for Urban Equity, CEPT University (May 2014).

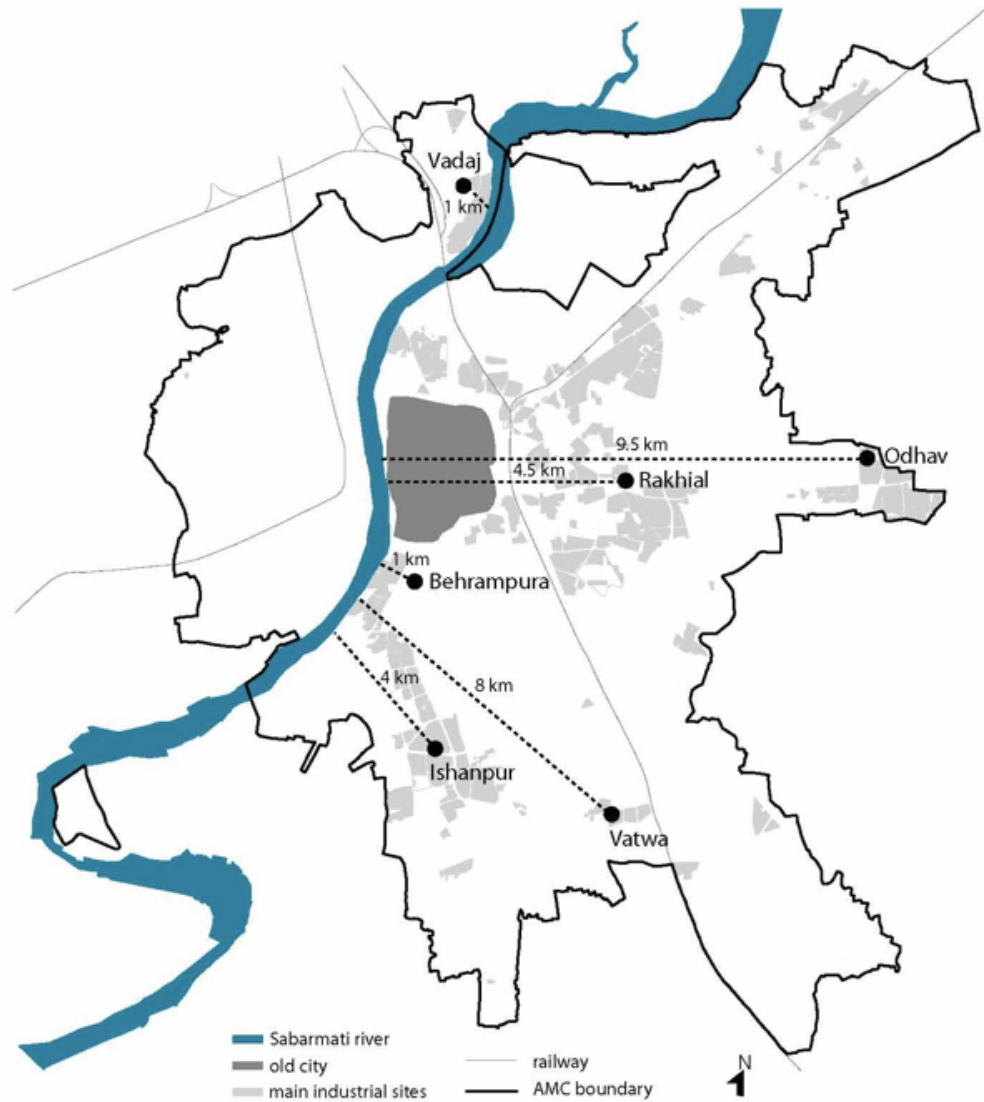


FIG. 12 Main relocation sites of some of the displaced slum dwellers once living on the riverbanks (map: Gloria Pessina, 2011).

The transformation of the riverfront in the heart of one of the fastest growing cities of India after the liberalization of the economy (1991) shows the reality of the theories elaborated by Brenner,<sup>54</sup> and even before by Harvey, about the capital spatial fix:<sup>55</sup> the surplus of the capitalist economy is used for spatial development, thus ensuring profits to those with privileged access to the spatial fix and discrimination against those with little access. In fact, Ahmedabad has been promoted by the state and national governments as one of the “locational nodes for transnational capital investment”,<sup>56</sup> both through direct private investment in the real estate developments along the riverfront and through a form of public funding of the major infrastructural works based on indebtedness towards international banks and investors.<sup>57</sup> The Sabarmati riverfront

54. Brenner, “Global Cities.” Id., *New state spaces*.

55. Harvey, *The urbanization of capital*.

56. Brenner, “Global Cities,” 3.

57. Christophe Jaffrelot, “No Model state”, *The Indian Express* (6 September 2013).





FIG. 13 Former slum dwellers on the western side of the Sabarmati riverfront under completion, while touristic activities start taking place along the river filled with water diverted from the Narmada canal (photo: Gloria Pessina, 2011).

became the flagship project of a transforming state, while large parts of Gujarat were offered at the Vibrant Gujarat biennial summit to Indian and foreign investors for industrial and real estate developments with very low taxation and little planning restrictions. [Fig. 13]

#### 4 The heritagization of Ahmedabad's city center

While the riverfront development was taking place, the city promoted a "Brand Ahmedabad" at the international level, that is to say "a marketing program to encourage investment from India and abroad 'in an attempt to reinvent, rediscover and repackage the 600-year-old city',"<sup>58</sup> in line with the Vibrant Gujarat biennial summit organized at the state level to attract international investments. During the celebrations of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011, various supra-local (Archeological Survey of India) and local institutions (AMC, CEPT university, Ahmedabad National Institute of Design) emphasized the conservation of the built environment and in particular of the city center, traditionally considered the main location for trade in Ahmedabad, hosting the main markets, shops, the stock exchange and the *po/s*, that is, dense residential blocks with inner courtyards, where traders of different castes and religions once lived side by side.

Through the centuries, the city center has also hosted various religious buildings, including the old Jama Masjid mosque built during the reign of Ahmed Shah, the founder of the city, and the more recent Swaminarayan Mandir, a Hindu temple built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the city center's Kalupur area, as well as a variety of Jain religious buildings. The 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations included events such as heritage walks through the monuments, as well as projects to restore the *po/s*, important religious

58. Howard Spodek, *Ahmedabad: Shock City of Twentieth-Century India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 269.



FIG. 14 The ancient city walls around the city center, on the eastern side of the river (photo: Mariana Félix Paisana, 2013).

buildings, some of the dense market areas and the remains of the city walls, especially in the section located between the old city and the river. [Fig. 14]

In the early 2000s further narratives were elaborated, in addition to those presented in the previous section (global competition, development, safety, access to public spaces etc.). Among the different discourses, purity and sacredness had a central role and were soon translated as the need to create a safe and clean urban environment, where vices would be banned. It is in this context that the dense old center started to be described as dirty in moral terms: "Over time, the old city grew into a symbol of dysfunctionality in Ahmedabad [...]. It was as if the old city enclosed a form of moral pollution that had to be presented as a way of underlining the relative purity of the remainder of the city."<sup>59</sup>

Such a narrative<sup>60</sup> has been supported with references to Hinduism and Jainism, which strongly condemn impure practices in Gujarat, such as the consumption of non-vegetarian food, which is part of the everyday life of the Muslim community living in the city center and beyond. As emphasized by the Indian sociologist Dia Da Costa in her writings about

59. Christophe Jaffrelot and Charlotte Thomas, "Facing ghettoization in 'Riot-city': Old Ahmedabad and Juhapura between victimization and self-help," in *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, edited by Christophe Jaffrelot and Laurent Gayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 66.

60. The relation between powerful narratives and religious connotations is further strengthened by the symbolic meaning attributed to water: the transfer of water from one of the seven sacred rivers of India according to the Hindu religion (the Narmada) to feed the previously dry Sabarmati has been advertised by the promoters of the project as a way to purify the places touched by the liquid. Such rhetoric has been particularly evident in the public speeches of the former Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat and current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. The head of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu right-wing nationalist party, has been among the most active supporters and promoters of the project for its salvific value.

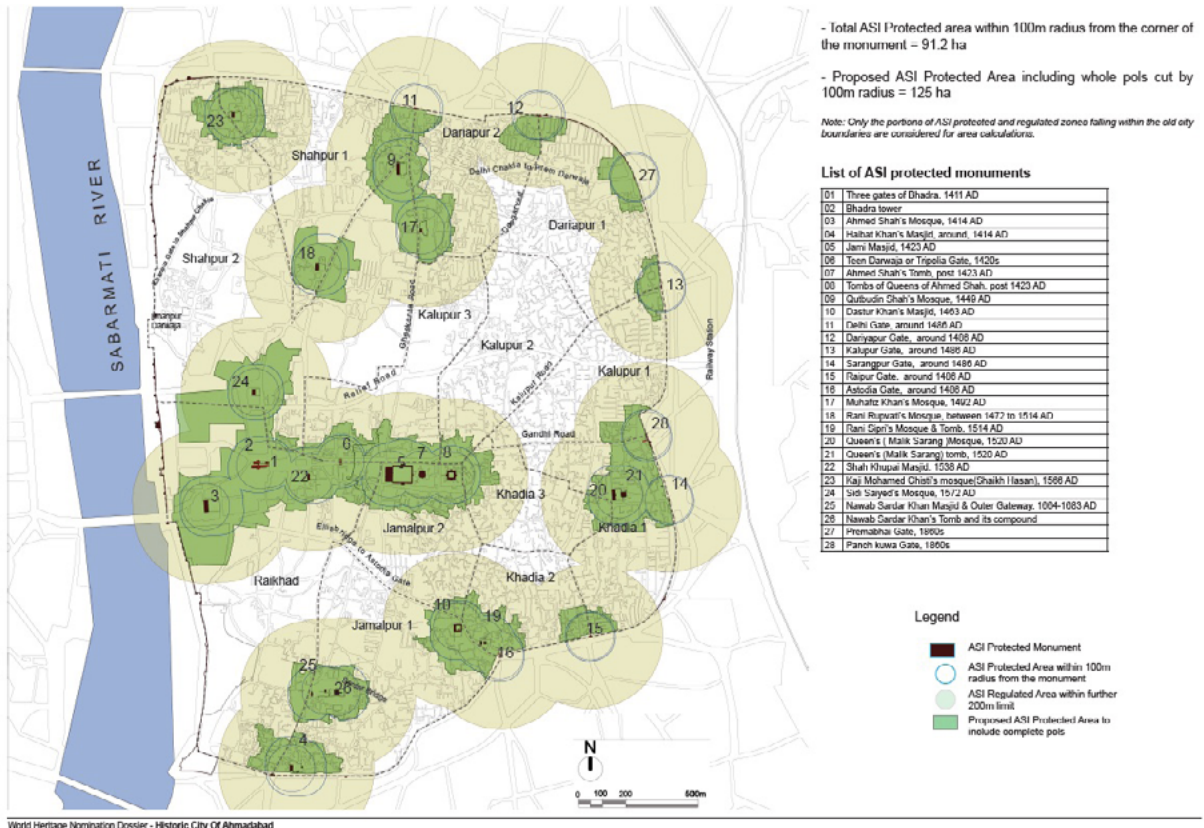


FIG. 15 Map showing the old walled city of Ahmedabad and the protected monuments of the area. The walled city coincides with the site inscribed in the World Heritage List. Its buffer zone extends around the walls Source UNESCO. "Historic city of Ahmadabad" (2017).

the politics of heritage in Ahmedabad<sup>61</sup> and in particular about the redevelopment plan of the Bhadra Plaza in the old city, "this plan reimaged the stretch between Teen Darwaza and Bhadra Fort [...] as a pedestrian zone. This stretch has long been a densely-populated, largely Muslim-area, bustling with traffic and vendors, and notably, many fish and meat shops. No doubt the logic of "cleaning up" and decongestion rhetorically invokes accessibility for citizens, heritage and reduced pollution, but it equally expresses classist definitions of pedestrian access, cleanliness and vegetarian tastes of Jains and upper caste Hindus. In so doing, it further normalizes the ordinary exclusion and violence against Muslim life, culture and work in the process of revaluing real estate via the creative economy discourse."<sup>62</sup>

To understand the significance of such observations, and how they relate to heritagization<sup>63</sup> and displacement,<sup>64</sup> it is helpful to consider one of the city's greatest shocks at the beginning of the 21st century,<sup>65</sup> that is, the

61. Dia Da Costa, "Sentimental Capitalism in Contemporary India: Art, Heritage, and Development in Ahmedabad, Gujarat," *Antipode* 47, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 74-97. Id., *Politicizing Creative Economy. Activism and a Hunger called Theatre* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016). Id., "Heritage City' Ahmedabad Was Built Through Violence and Exclusion." *The Wire India* (August 11, 2017).

62. Id., "Sentimental Capitalism."

63. Herzfeld, *Evicted from Eternity*. Id., "Engagement, Gentrification."

64. De Cesari and Dimova, "Heritage, gentrification, participation."

65. Howard Spodek, *Ahmedabad*.



FIG. 16 Land reclamation and monument valorization on the eastern side of the Sabarmati showing also few remained shack houses (photo: Gloria Pessina, 2012)

“pogrom”<sup>66</sup> of the Muslim population by Hindu radicals in particular in the city center of Ahmedabad and in various parts of Gujarat. In 2002, this series of traumatic events resulted in the deaths of around 1000 Muslims and in the loss or damage of thousands of Muslims’ properties, especially in the city center.<sup>67</sup> These events were followed by the migration of Muslims to other parts of the city, where they could feel safer. This phenomenon gave rise to an increasing process of social and spatial segregation in the city of Ahmedabad, which became “a city of many borders.”<sup>68</sup> [Fig. 16]

In 2017, the historical center of Ahmedabad was inscribed in the World Heritage List by UNESCO as the only Indian Heritage City for its Outstanding Universal Value. It was said (ii) “to exhibit an important interchange of human values over a span of time [...] on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design” and (v) “to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement [...] or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.”<sup>69</sup>

The UNESCO heritage site, composed of the old city center and a buffer zone of 300 meters around the ancient city walls, comprised also the

66. Human Rights Watch, “We have no order to save you.” Patel, “Narendra Modi.”

67. Yagnik and Sheth *The shaping of modern Gujarat*. Bobbio, “Making Gujarat vibrant.” Pessina, “The ‘Missing Conflict’.”

68. Darshini Mahadevia, “A city with many borders: beyond ghettoisation in Ahmedabad,” In *Indian Cities in Transition*, edited by Annapurna Shaw (Orient Longman: New Delhi, 2007).

69. UNESCO, “Historic city of Ahmadabad.”

central portion of the riverfront [Fig. 15], and became mostly a site for monument preservation and folklore showcasing in the global context of the rising cultural tourism industry.<sup>70</sup> UNESCO recommended the reconnection of the city center and the waterfront through a “Historic Urban Landscape” approach,<sup>71</sup> i.e. through in-depth surveys on the natural, cultural and human resources of the city, through participatory planning and stakeholders’ consultation as well as through the integration of the conservation activity in the wider city development framework.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, several local and international observers have been noticing the ongoing relation between heritage conservation in the center of Ahmedabad and the displacement of the weakest strata of the population in the center itself, and along the river.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, many of the creative practices (fabric production and dyeing, pottery, jewelry, food processing and sale etc.) now showcased in the market areas in the center (Bhadra square) and along the riverfront (Sunday market) originated from those who were displaced from these areas and barely have access to them now. Heritage valorization in this case fits the description of an economy of enrichment in which those with privileged access to heritage benefit, while those without that access are displaced.

## 5 Conclusion

Much has been written about the Sabarmati riverfront development project and about the transformations of Ahmedabad in recent years, but an article in an international landscape architecture journal is especially telling: “Whatever the outcome, the project is a leitmotif in the context of river and waterfront redevelopment projects now popping up in Indian cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Calcutta and Lucknow. Ahmedabad is breaking new ground, both literally and figuratively, in the redevelopment of Indian cities.”<sup>74</sup> The authors highlighted the influential role played by Ahmedabad in the Indian context, being the first Indian city with such an ambitious riverfront project, which could be replicated throughout the continent. They emphasized the project’s sustainability, its valorization of Ahmedabad’s unique heritage, and growing development opportunities for a historic city attempting to become global.

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70. Marco D’Eramo, *Il selfie del mondo. Indagine sull’età del turismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2017). Settis, *If Venice Dies*.

71. Heleni Porfyriou and Marichela Sepe, *Waterfronts revisited. European ports in a historic and global perspective* (London: Routledge, 2016).

72. UNESCO, “Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape” (2011) Accessed June 10, 2019.

73. Da Costa, “Sentimental Capitalism.” Id., *Politicizing Creative Economy*. Id., “Heritage City.” Desai, “Entrepreneurial Urbanism.” Mahadevia et al., “City Profile: Ahmedabad.” Spodek, *Ahmedabad*. Yagnik and Sheth, *Ahmedabad. From Royal City to Megacity* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

74. Anne-Katrin Fenk, and Karsten Scheffer, “Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project”, *TOPOS*, 68 (2009): 42-45.

The narratives around the transformation of the city via new developments and conservation promoted by the local governing coalition were also convincing to the local and national Hindu and Jain rising middle class and were further promoted by influential media, not only locally or nationally, as part of a precise political agenda, but also internationally. As Renu Desai noticed, “as a gateway for pursuing investment and profit opportunities in Gujarat, Ahmedabad’s re-imagining became an integral part of re-imagining and promoting Gujarat”<sup>75</sup> especially after the 2002 *pogrom*. In this re-imagining, water served as a powerful element to give the city a new identity and partly erase the previous one, recalling what the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich called “waters of forgetfulness.”<sup>76</sup>

Exceptional spaces such as the Sabarmati River Front Development Project, mainly managed by newly appointed institutions, seem to represent the spatial fix for the production of capital and power at multiple scales, not excluding the state, often neglected in the literature about globalization.<sup>77</sup> The case of Ahmedabad shows the fundamental importance of the valorization of the heritage in an economy of enrichment, or as Da Costa would also put it, a powerful and hard-to-resist “sentimental capitalism,” in which not everybody’s heritage counts.<sup>78</sup> The transformation of the city of Ahmedabad into a global city with a historic heart involves the increasing segregation, exclusion and repression of the part of the population whose heritage and contemporary lives are considered less valuable<sup>79</sup>—a fact that a few critical local voices have tried to highlight in the past decades.<sup>80</sup>

Initially, the Sabarmati riverfront development project relied on a rhetoric of global competition, development and safety from floods. In a subsequent phase a new narrative around the valorization of heritage and culture was introduced, which resulted in the conservation of the city center and in the cultural valorization of the riverfront stretch comprised in the buffer zone of the UNESCO site. This narrative change reflected both a renewed interest in tradition and religion in the BJP-ruled Gujarat,<sup>81</sup> as well as in the cultural dimensions of global waterfront development.<sup>82</sup>

Compared with other cases of waterfront development, Ahmedabad presents a mix of elements from different models: for its large-scale infrastructural development and for the detachment from a large part of the city, it follows a waterfront development model elaborated in the

75. Desai, “Entrepreneurial Urbanism,” 42.

76. Ivan Illich, *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness. Reflections on the Historicity of ‘Stuff’* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1985).

77. Brenner, *New state spaces*.

78. Da Costa, “Sentimental Capitalism.”

79. Herzfeld, *Evicted from Eternity*. De Cesari and Dimova, “Heritage, gentrification, participation.”

80. Desai, “Governing the Urban Poor.” Id., “Entrepreneurial Urbanism.” Mahadevia, “A city with many borders.” Mahadevia et al., “City Profile: Ahmedabad.” Navdeep Mathur, “On the Sabarmati riverfront”. Tagnik and Sheth *The shaping of modern Gujarat*. Id., Ahmedabad.

81. Desai, “Entrepreneurial Urbanism.”

82. Porfyriou and Sepe, *Waterfronts revisited*.

1980s and 1990s in the West (e.g. Baltimore, Boston, London), especially because the project initially foresaw a combination of leisure, tourism and tertiary functions.<sup>83</sup> For its combination of large developments and the valorization of culture and heritage, it resembles some Eastern Mediterranean port cities such as Beirut, a city that was defined in the early twenty-first century as “an ancient city for the future.”<sup>84</sup> Another model for Ahmedabad’s development is Shanghai, which shares a colonial past with the Indian city and is currently exploiting that past in the cultural tourism industry, while urbanization is booming.

To conclude, I argue that the Sabarmati riverfront combines a variety of waterfront development models from different periods and various parts of the world, often reproducing their contradictions and falling short of dealing effectively with the local specificities of Ahmedabad, both in socio-economic and in spatial terms.

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83. Hein, Carola (ed.), *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global networks* (London: Routledge, 2011). Porfyriou and Sepe, *Waterfronts revisited*. Stephen V. Ward. “Port Cities and the Global Exchange of Planning Ideas”, in *Port Cities: Dynamic Landscapes and Global Networks*, edited by Carola Hein (London: Routledge, 2011).

84. Porfyriou and Sepe, *Waterfronts revisited*.

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