Anthony D. King

Now (2020) that Manhattan was itself largely a heap of ruins following the gradual decline and then collapse of its financial trading functions... the people of Hong Kong had come to realize the false values on which their first ‘global city’ had been built - a total commitment to profit-hungry capitalism and a way of manifesting this, in the skyscraper skyline, that was totally dependent on Western, especially American, forms of design (King 2000a:235).

Perhaps the most striking absence in cross-cultural urban studies is reference to the institutions, power, and growing influence in many cities worldwide of religious movements, old and new. I refer here not simply to specific cities worldwide where the promotion or defense of particular religious identities has (for decades if not for centuries) been the defining force in the space and politics of the city - Belfast, Jerusalem, Beirut, Tehran, Varanasi, Rome, Istanbul - but also to the fact that, in a universe where worlds are shaped by particular religious *world*views, it might be worth asking why so-called ‘world cities’ are overwhelmingly only in one of those worlds, conventionally understood as ‘Christian’, and mostly in Protestant states.

Cities are not only sites of financial and economic activity, but also of symbolic and cultural capital. Particular sacred cities worldwide have, in recent years, become the sites for staging major religio-political struggles. In these, the essential element of the urban, namely, the building as symbolic signifier, as marker of sacred space, has become the pre-eminent site of religious and often violent political struggles – in India, Ayodhya, Amritsar, Mumbai; in the Middle East, Makka, Jerusalem; in Sri Lanka, Kandy, to say nothing of Waco in Texas, Jonesville, or the World Trade Center in New York (King 2000b:267).

It is the building, whose presence is mysteriously absent in every kind of social or cultural theoretical discourse, in which the ideology of all these ‘imagined communities’ and ‘imagined environments’, is contained, materialised and symbolised. It is within the space and form of the building in which the social is most frequently constituted, in which its visual image announces its presence - in the city, in the nation, and in various distinct worlds. It is also, in this post cold-war era of ‘peace’, the presence and structure (as well as media-transmitted images) of the building that we are learning to see as the most important symbol of live and lost causes: in India, for the communalist Shiv Sena and the rightwing BJP, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya; in England, for the negotiating statements of the IRA, the Hong Kong Bank in the City of London; in the United States, for the splinter groups of an Islamic jihad, the World Trade building in New York... and for the rightwing, anti-government militia, the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. As the barbed wire and electronic security systems are dismantled from the often ruralized, distant borders of the nation-state, they are re-installed around the perimeters of vulnerable icons in the city.

It is not just that the urban public or private building becomes a manageable project for one, or a larger cadre of politically-motivated activists; it is also that it is, already, a signifier of some organization or ideology which, when invaded, blown up or burnt down, takes on an additional level of significance. It focuses the lens of the journalist’s camera, the eye of the camcorder, the direction of the mobile TV. It is always the image of the building - rarely the diffuse and ungraspable ‘city, and even less, the ‘imagined community’ of the ‘nation’ - which is used to fix our gaze on the limited space of the rectangular screen (King 1996:101).

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References