Non-place, dispossession, and the 2010 Commonwealth Games: An urban transformation analyzed

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ABSTRACT

French anthropologist Marc Augé's concept of the 'non-place' is a useful tool for critiquing the excesses of modernity and capitalism, such as the destruction of small, egalitarian communities, and the dissolution of meaningful, face-to-face relations between people. Augé's concept is used in this essay to explore the multifaceted changes brought about by the 19th Commonwealth Games to the city of Delhi, India, where this 'mega-event' was held in October of the year 2010. The politics driving the creation and proliferation of 'non-places,' particularly in relation to the Commonwealth Games, are examined, in an attempt to provide insight into how neoliberal policies and practices are advanced and entrenched at the local level in India, altering economic, social, and political relationships. Additionally, disruptions of the intended meaning and function of 'non-places' are explored in order to draw attention to the fragility of neoliberal projects, imposed from 'above', and the emergence of local spaces of resistance. Processes of neo-liberalization, as this essay suggests, are often incomplete or discontinuous.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of developing countries are competing to host international sporting and cultural events, such as the Olympic Games and Expos (World Fairs), in order to enhance their global recognition, image and status. Notable examples are the Beijing Summer Olympics, held in China in 2008, the 2010 FIFA World Cup, held in South Africa, the Sochi Winter Olympics, hosted by Russia in 2014, and the 2014 FIFA World Cup, hosted by Brazil. The world's eyes are now on Russia and Qatar, where preparations are underway for hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2018 and 2022 respectively. Over the years, India has hosted a series of international sporting events, each time with greater fanfare — the 1951 and 1982 Asian Games; the 1987, 1996 and 2011 Cricket World Cup; the 2003 Afro-Asian Games, and the 2010 Hockey World Cup. The grandest in this chain of 'mega-events' was held in Delhi in the first two weeks of October, 2010 — the 19th Commonwealth Games.

Government officials responsible for staging large-scale or 'mega' events, along with much of the mainstream media, are often exclusively focused on whether the event in question will successfully establish the host country's 'world class' credentials. Nonetheless, a growing body of literature, produced by academics

and activists, has developed around the question of the impact of such events on their host cities and local populations. This literature suggests that mega-events tend to have a noticeable and lasting impact on the cities that host them by altering built environments and the daily lives of citizens. Certainly, not all of the effects are considered detrimental. Some large sporting events have led to positive changes, such as after the Munich Olympics in 1972, when the athletes' village was turned into community housing for lower income families and single persons. As Bohler (2011) suggests, furthermore, there is reason to be optimistic about the beneficial impact and sustainability of mega-events hosted by developing countries.

Yet the negative effects are also well-documented, especially among scholars who share a committed political concern about growing urban inequalities, the loss of sustainable urban livelihoods, and the weakening of local-level democracy. Among other things, these scholars have pointed out that the effort to 're-brand' a city through a mega-event typically increases the public debt by a staggering amount, and benefits international tourists and globally-connected national elites at the expense of local, less affluent populations (see, for example, Bray, 2011; Matheson & Baade, 2004). Lives and livelihoods are disrupted and destroyed as public spaces are enclosed in order to clear the way for giant sports stadiums, exhibition halls, athletes' compounds, shopping arcades, new roads, highways, and other infrastructure to support

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the mega-event. Despite all of this, however, the impact of mega-events on cities and local populations is usually overlooked by national and international media in their coverage of the 'spectacle.' And even when it is noticed, it is viewed as the accidental by-product of efforts, by national government elites, to boost their country's image and international prestige. The idea that mega-events are inherently political, and that they may be deliberately instrumentalized to advance a local agenda, is usually not under consideration. Sociologist Amita Baviskar (2010) has pointed out, for example, that "spectacular events" are meant to create a celebratory mood, a "buzz, a collective excitement, that "conjures up consent even to the most egregious waste of public money." Indeed, from this perspective, mega-events may also be viewed as policy instruments. They are of great utility while trying to push through controversial policies that might otherwise linger in the pending file for years. This is because when national pride or a city's reputation is at stake, it is easier to suppress dissension and surge forward with politically difficult projects.

Through an analysis of the Commonwealth Games of 2010, this essay seeks to contribute to the burgeoning literature on the impact of sporting 'mega-events' on cities, especially cities in the global South, and in particular, on the use of mega-events to push forward urban policy agendas that might otherwise provoke considerable resistance. It should be clarified, at the outset, that it is not the intent of the author to engage in a cost-benefit analysis of the impact of mega-events on cities. Like much of the critical literature on mega-events, this essay arises out of committed political concern about growing urban inequalities, the loss of sustainable livelihoods, and the health of local democracy. From this point of view, even if various 'positive' effects of mega-events are noted — such as the creation of new jobs or an increase in residential and commercial property values — they do not cancel or 'balance out' the negative effects and make the critical literature any less relevant. Indeed, it is the author's objective to clarify concepts and improve arguments *within* the critical literature on mega-events and cities rather than to step *outside* this literature and challenge it (the latter may certainly be a worthwhile enterprise, but for the time being, it is not this author's).

This essay seeks to achieve two objectives by engaging with concepts drawn from the critical urban studies literature — which is broad and very eclectic — and applying these to analyse the 2010 Commonwealth Games. One, it attempts to understand the nature of the changes brought about by the 2010 Commonwealth Games to the city of Delhi. This is done by deploying the concept of 'non-place,' extracted from anthropologist Marc Augé's seminal text, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Augé, 1995 [1992]). It is argued that the Commonwealth Games spurred the proliferation of Augéian non-places, changing not only the physical character of the city, but also how citizens relate to their built environment and to one another. The Augéian concept of non-place, it is further argued, also provides insight into why spatial changes designed to facilitate a mega-event often stray from their intended effect, resulting in the creation of a purgatory of what may be termed as 'in-between' spaces. The second objective of this essay is to examine the *politics* that drive the creation of non-places, a subject that Augé himself does not pay sufficient attention to in his analysis. In order to do so, this essay utilizes geographer David Harvey's concept of 'accumulation by dispossession,' which is articulated in several texts by Harvey, including an essay on 'the new imperialism' in the *Socialist Register* (2004). The concept describes a process, ensuing from neoliberal policies and practices, through which wealth and power become concentrated in the hands of a few.

The central argument of this essay, drawing upon both Augé and Harvey, is that while the 2010 Commonwealth Games profoundly altered the city of Delhi through the proliferation of non-places and in-between spaces, they represent but one moment along a broader trajectory of change that is best characterized as 'accumulation by dispossession.' In this sense, the Commonwealth Games provide more than a window to how Third World cities change as a consequence of mega sporting events. This mega-event provides insight into why and how such events were used to advance capitalist development and 'modernization,' and later, to entrench the policies and practices of the neoliberal state. Indeed, my view is that esoteric concepts such as Augé's non-place — and Rem Koolhaas's 'junkspace' (discussed later in the paper) — though captivating and illuminating, must be read in conjunction with an explicitly political concept such as Marxist geographer David Harvey's (2004) 'accumulation by dispossession,' which points to a clear process of centralization of capital in the hands of a few through which urban transformations are rendered.

This essay's equally important observation, however, is that the converse is also true. Reading 'accumulation by dispossession' in juxtaposition with 'non-place' brings texture and nuance to the former, highlighting the tentativeness of the processes described by the term. As explained at more length below, the concept of 'non-place' calls attention to the incompleteness of neoliberal policy interventions and, more generally, to discontinuities within neoliberal trajectories, which otherwise tend to be viewed as more totalizing than they actually are, on the ground, in cities of the global South (for a critique of how theories of urban neoliberalism tend to overstate the impact of the neoliberal state and use neoliberalism as a "ubiquitous frame," see Parnell & Robinson, 2012). The concept of 'non-place,' in other words, not only illuminates what is *created* by processes of 'accumulation by dispossession,' but also what such processes *fail to obliterate*. Indeed, it is when the two concepts are taken together that their explanatory powers are better amplified.

2. The 'NON place' and its politics

The term 'non-place' requires further elaboration. Briefly, then — as other aspects of the concept will be explored later — 'non-place' may be defined as "a space that cannot be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity" (Augé, 1995: 78). Augé's basic thesis is that non-places are produced by 'supermodernity,' or a deepening or intensification of modernity, and the associated 'modern' values of individual choice and freedom. Whereas 'places' tend to create thick social relations and are embedded in them, non-places create "solitary contractuality" (Augé, 1995: 78). Augé writes that "the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it)," and is "reminded, when necessary, that the contract exists" (101). One element of this has to do with the way that non-places are used: tickets must be bought, credit cards scanned, and identity documents checked, in a way that "the user of the non-place is always required to prove his innocence" (102). Examples offered by Augé include airports, railway stations, toll roads, supermarkets, hotel chains and large retail outlets.

Another aspect of the non-place is the total de-linking of past from present. Non-places, Augé argues, "do not integrate earlier places: instead these are listed, classified [and] promoted to the status of 'places of memory'" (78). Examples would be theme parks and resorts, which promise customers the *experience* of distant or historic places — an Amazonian village or an oasis in the Sahara — without any attempt to assimilate the original. History, as Augé notes, is "transformed into an element of spectacle" (103). In the spaces of these non-places, Augé writes, the link between individuals and their surroundings is established "through the mediation of words, or even texts … the imagination of a person