Review Article

Beyond Visual Appeal: A Multidimensional Approach to City Beautification in India

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A B S T R A C T

City beautification projects in India often incorporate the rejuvenation of natural public spaces and are aimed to enhance their visual appeal. This article proposes a multidimensional approach to city beautification that moves beyond mere aesthetics and recognises the complex interplay between social, environmental, and economic factors. This can be achieved through community-centric design; that is shifting the focus from top-down, expert-driven beautification to participatory approaches that empower communities to define and shape their own beautiful spaces. The article argues that effective beautification efforts must address the diverse needs and aspirations of residents, foster a sense of belonging, and contribute to the overall well-being and resilience of the city. This article aims to provide a framework for city beautification that is not only aesthetically pleasing but also socially equitable and environmentally responsible. In doing so, we can unlock the transformative potential of beauty to create vibrant, healthy, and liveable cities for all.

Keywords: City Beautification, Visual Appeal, Multidimensional Approach, Community-Centric Design, Participatory Planning

Introduction

City beautification projects have become increasingly popular in recent years as a way to improve urban environments and quality of life. Drawing upon and extending to Immanuel Kant's idea of aesthetics. The article suggests the basic approach of city beautification; that is beyond visual appeal, which expands the definition of beauty to encompass not just visual elements, but also aspects like social cohesion, inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and cultural vibrancy.

The rejuvenation and restoration of natural public spaces like water bodies and riverfronts have become a major focus of many city beautification projects across India. Indian cities are implementing major initiatives to visually enhance the city's natural spaces and its surrounding areas.

For example, the flagship Namami Gange program aims to modernise and renovate 270 ghats, crematoria, kunds, and ponds across the entire Ganga River basin and its tributaries through riverfront development projects.[1] Under the hybrid model, private entities can adopt sections of riverbanks in cities like Haridwar, Kanpur, and Varanasi to undertake enhancement initiatives. These projects, partially funded by the government, include upgrading ghats, constructing pavements, installing lightings, providing public amenities, and other such things along the riverfront areas. Varanasi has renovated its major ghats along the Ganges River with improved walkways and lightings under the Ganga Riverfront Development project. Other examples include the Sabarmati Riverfront Development in Ahmedabad which has transformed the banks of the Sabarmati River. The initiative involves landscaping the riverbank, creation

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of public amenities, and development of recreational zones along the riverfront.[2] Bengaluru's several lakes rejuvenation project focuses on landscaping, walking tracks, and fencing dozens of urban lakes.[3] Natural spaces in Indian cities are now thriving recreational hubs.

Sustainable Development Goal 11 is about sustainable cities and communities. Its objective is to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by providing universal access to green and public spaces that are safe, inclusive and accessible. However, the real challenge lies in identifying practical, actionable, and realistic policy measures and adapting them to the Indian local context. Several policies in India endorse the rejuvenation of public natural spaces:

- **The Smart Cities Mission:** The Smart Cities Mission launched in 2015 aims to modernise and revitalise 100 cities across the country. A key focus is on area-based development which includes projects like restoring and upgrading parks, gardens, waterfronts, and other public spaces. It focuses on creating visually appealing urban spaces.
- **Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT):** It provides funds to develop green spaces, improve landscaping, and add public art installations in Indian cities.
- **Clean India Mission (Swachh Bharat Abhiyan):** The Clean India Mission places emphasis on cleanliness and aesthetic improvements in cities. Public spaces, including water bodies, parks, and streets undergo transformations to enhance their visual appeal, contributing to a cleaner and more vibrant environment.
- **Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY):** HRIDAY aims to preserve and revitalise the cultural heritage of cities, incorporating beautification strategies to highlight historical landmarks and promote tourism. This initiative underscores the connection between aesthetics and cultural preservation.

Urban local bodies frequently undertake city beautification projects by aligning with these policies, emphasising the rejuvenation of natural public spaces to enhance the visual appeal.

Visually appealing urban spaces offer several benefits that directly impact people's well-being and the liveliness of cities. However, beautification needs to be purposeful, inclusive, and mindful of functionality.[4] Aesthetic enhancements are proven to foster positive psychology. Visual richness has an overall reviving effect essential in modern cities. Attractiveness builds the distinctive identity and brand of a city that residents connect with. However, cities must ensure that the branding aligns with, and promotes, core values regarding sustainability, diversity, and accessibility. Beautification approaches must mitigate the ill effects of gentrification. At the same time, beautification cannot

exist for its own sake as a superficial cosmetic exercise. The beautification initiatives must consider the inclusion of marginalised groups and the democratic use of public spaces. Only then visual transformation can foster socially thriving communities.

Drawing upon Immanuel Kant's philosophical perspective, particularly his ideas on aesthetics, offers relevant insights for city beautification. Kant's profound ideas on aesthetics and beauty provide a philosophical lens through which we can contemplate city beautification, especially in the context of rejuvenating natural public spaces. In Kant's view, beauty is associated with pleasure and harmony, and aesthetic judgment is grounded in the interplay of imagination and understanding.[5] Kant emphasised the subjective nature of beauty, suggesting that it resides in the individual's perceptual experience.[6] Referring to Ghertner (2015) in his book "Rule by Aesthetics World-Class City Making in Delhi" emphasises the potential for aesthetic judgment to foster inter-subjective agreement and community formation but warns of its susceptibility to manipulation by hegemonic powers, which can exploit individual sensuous experiences to promote dominant norm.[7] According to Eagleton, the aesthetic is a "contradictory, double-edged concept" - it can be emancipatory but also a mode of repression and hegemony when backed by power.[8] Welsch views the aestheticisation of urban spaces as merely a "cosmetic of reality" serving the economic interests of elites.[9] Harvey suggests behind the churning of aesthetic codes and fashions lies a hierarchy of values and imposition of taste favouring certain dominant groups.[10] While Kant elevates aesthetics, the above-cited works engage critically with how aesthetics, backed by power, can also obscure inequality and exclusion in the context of city beautification. In aligning Kant's ideas with city beautification, the article emphasises the significance of creating spaces that not only please the eye but also resonate with the individual's subjective experiences and contribute to a collective aesthetic consciousness.

Therefore, the article advocates the transition to a multi-dimensional approach to city beautification that recognises that modern cities are complex and require holistic solutions. A multifaceted approach involves the integration of social, environmental, and economic considerations. Rather than addressing each aspect in isolation, this approach acknowledges the intricate relationship between these factors and seeks solutions that create mutual benefits. The multidimensional approach extends beyond the superficial enhancement of visual aesthetics. While visual appeal remains important, the focus broadens to encompass a more inclusive definition of "beauty" that includes social cohesion, inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and cultural vibrancy. Shifting away from top-down, expert-driven approaches, the multifaceted model emphasises

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community-centric design. It recognises the importance of involving local communities in the planning and decision-making processes, empowering them to define and shape their own living spaces. A key aspect of the multidimensional approach is the acknowledgement of the diverse needs and aspirations of city residents.

Beyond Visual Appeal: Expanding the Notion of Beauty

The notion of beauty has traditionally been associated with visual appeal. Beautification projects have largely focused on visual elements such as grand architecture and picturesque landscapes. This narrow approach fails to capture the multifaceted nature of beauty in the urban context. The article expands the conventional perceptions of beauty to include aspects beyond the visual by using Kant's ideas on aesthetics. In his "Critique of Judgment," Kant argued that beauty is not merely in the object but is a result of the harmonious interaction between the perceiver's imagination and understanding.[5] Kant elevated aesthetics beyond the superficial by rooting beauty in the larger realm of human purpose and morality. Urban beautification efforts thus have a responsibility to move societies closer to order, justice and reason. Rather than temporary pleasures of decoration, true 'beauty' develops collective virtues.

Building upon Kant's insights, the article proposes a framework that goes beyond mere visual appeal, incorporating social cohesion, inclusivity, environmental sustainability, and cultural vibrancy into the definition of beauty. Beauty, in this context, creates a more profound connection between individuals and their surroundings. This emphasises a shift from top-down, expert-driven beautification approaches to community-centric design. Beautification must make marginalised communities visible and empowered. Empowering communities to define and shape their own spaces allows for a diversity of perspectives and preferences. Through collective caretaking of public spaces, people develop attachments and interest in urban issues. Beauty should foster civic responsibility.

This expanded notion of beauty, which embraces the social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, not only aligns with Kant's philosophy but also unlocks the transformative potential of beauty. By going beyond the visual appeal, cities can aspire to become vibrant, healthy, and liveable spaces that resonate with the diverse and subjective experiences of their inhabitants.

The Multi-Dimensional Approach to City Beautification

A truly comprehensive city beautification approach requires a multidimensional framework that associates city beautification with the advancement of society. This model proposes four interconnected pillars:

- **Aesthetic Development:** Beautification efforts visibly enhance public spaces through landscaping, greening initiatives and other ornamentation like lighting, fencing, etc. However, Kant's writings critically underscore beauty as more than superficial ornamentation. The built space must inspire collective virtues of knowledge, justice, and rational thinking in citizens.
- **Social Development:** Urban space plays a constructive role in social relations. Beautification should preserve the marginalised identities by supporting their participation in public activities and opening decision-making. When people connect with their environment, they develop attachment and shared responsibility.
- **Environmental Restoration:** The ecological, visual and social fabrics are the interlinked keystones for holistic urban habitats. Beautification through restoration, bio-diverse plantations, sustainably designed landscapes and conservation develops healthy, vibrant biodiversity and environmental consciousness.
- **Economic Progress:** Attractive surroundings and culturally rooted creative place-making strategies boost property values, local enterprise opportunities, and the influx of resources and visitors, but ecological sensitivity and equitable distribution of economic gains remain vital. Goal-alignment tools can map complex interdependencies.

Community Centric Design

Urban beautification takes a transformative turn with the integration of community-centric design, a pivotal aspect within the multifaceted approach. This section delves into the intricate dynamics of community involvement in shaping the aesthetic fabric of the cities, highlighting the profound impact of moving from expert-driven models to participatory approaches.

Community-centric design emphasises the active involvement of local residents and stakeholders in the planning and execution of beautification projects. This goes beyond the conventional top-down approaches, fostering a collaborative environment where the community becomes an integral part of the decision-making process.[11] Drawing inspiration from Kantian subjectivity, where individual judgments play a crucial role, community-centric design respects and integrates the diverse perspectives and preferences of those who inhabit and utilise urban spaces.

The shift from expert-driven to participatory approaches signifies a departure from centralised decision-making towards a more inclusive and democratic process. Kant's philosophy, with its emphasis on individual autonomy and subjective judgment, aligns with the idea that residents should have a say in shaping their own environment. This approach led to democratising the beautification process,

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considering it enhances the sense of ownership, pride, and connection within communities.

Addressing Diverse Needs and Aspirations

In the pursuit of a comprehensive city beautification framework, it is imperative to address the diverse needs and aspirations of urban residents. The significance of acknowledging and catering to the varied requirements of communities, fostering a sense of belonging within beautification initiatives, and understanding the pivotal role aspirations play in shaping the design and planning process.

A successful city beautification strategy must consider the diverse needs of the residents who inhabit these spaces. This involves recognising and accommodating differences in demographics, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Drawing on Kantian principles that emphasise the subjective nature of aesthetic judgments, a nuanced understanding of diverse resident needs is essential for creating inclusive and accessible urban environments. Creating a sense of belonging is integral to the success of any city beautification endeavour. This fosters a collective identity and ownership among residents. Community engagement, cultural inclusivity, and the integration of local narratives into the design process are key components.

Aspirations serve as potent drivers in shaping the design and planning process of urban spaces. Understanding the aspirations of residents can lead to more meaningful and resonant beautification initiatives. Kant's emphasis on the connection between aesthetic experiences and human aspirations aligns with the idea that city beautification should not only meet basic needs but also inspire and uplift communities.

Conclusion

Beautification efforts in cities must move beyond ornamentation towards deeper ethical purposes for society. Kant saw aesthetic development as an ethical imperative to realise our humanity. Urban beautification thus concerns how cities uplift knowledge and thinking in inhabitants. Enhancing city beauty should foster responsibility towards public spaces beyond personal interests. The city beautification initiatives should go beyond the traditional confines of visual appeal to incorporate social, environmental, and economic dimensions. The proposed framework advocates for a paradigm shift – a departure from aesthetics-centric models towards holistic approaches that acknowledge the complex interplay of diverse factors within urban landscapes.

The exploration of community-centric design highlights the transformative potential of democratising the beautification process, empowering residents to shape their own environments. By aligning with Kantian subjectivity, this approach respects the diverse perspectives and preferences of communities, fostering a collaborative and inclusive ethos. Addressing diverse needs and aspirations emerges as a cornerstone of the framework, recognising that successful beautification must be tailored to the unique characteristics and desires of residents.

In conclusion, the multifaceted approach to city beautification, informed by Kantian aesthetics, outlines a strategy towards vibrant, healthy, and liveable cities. By going beyond superficial aesthetics and embracing the complexities of social equity, environmental responsibility, and community empowerment, cities can unlock the transformative potential of beauty. This signifies not only an enhancement of the urban landscape but a fundamental shift towards resilient, inclusive, and harmonious urban environments for all.

Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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