

SACRED SPACES: ELECTRONIC PLACES

A hybrid methodology to read and design for historic urban religious precincts

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Keywords: *Religious precincts — Digital realm — Hybrid methodology — Participatory forum — Interactive Design Plan.*

CHNT Reference: Borgohain, A. (2021). 'SACRED SPACES: ELECTRONIC PLACES. A hybrid methodology to read and design for historic urban religious precincts', in CHNT – ICOMOS Editorial board. *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies*. Heidelberg: Propylaeum.

Introduction

Historically, religious cities preserve their identity within them in certain parts, which have been termed as 'religious precincts' (during this thesis). They seem to have functions that still are embedded in the logic of religious/cultural rituals and mythological narratives. They are somewhat of a cultural Palimpsest¹ and the newest layer superimposed on them is that of the digital realm. If we think of digital as another mode of affecting or living in a space and relationships around the world are mediated through it; much like any other media, like radio, t.v., etc. Then we come to realise that digital is not a completely unique mode of existence outside our world, but rather one that enables the relationships that we are inhabiting today. The relationships which define the contemporary religious zeitgeist in such precincts. This can be clearly seen through the shift of religious practices into the digital realm, especially in India, in cases of- e-puja, live darshan, online religious cults/communities, etc (Shankar, P. 2010). Also, the Cyberculture², namely- social media platforms, have become significant in socially expressing the religious experience or leaving a footprint on platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Are these platforms, then, only a facilitator of mere expression? Rather, the thesis imagines utilizing these data (as a collaborative asset) to provide opportunities for designers and planners to test if historic religious precincts can be made adaptive to current development pressures. Thus, enabling us to understand, analyze and intervene better in contexts of such cultural heritage.

¹ See Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Palimpsest. Retrieved September 18, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palimpsest>.

² Tardini, S. (2009). Cyberculture. Development of IT and Virtual Communities. In M. Pagani (Eds.), Chp-01, Encyclopedia of Multimedia Technology and Networking, Second Edition (pp. 349-355). IGI Global. <http://doi:10.4018/978-1-60566-014-1.ch048>.

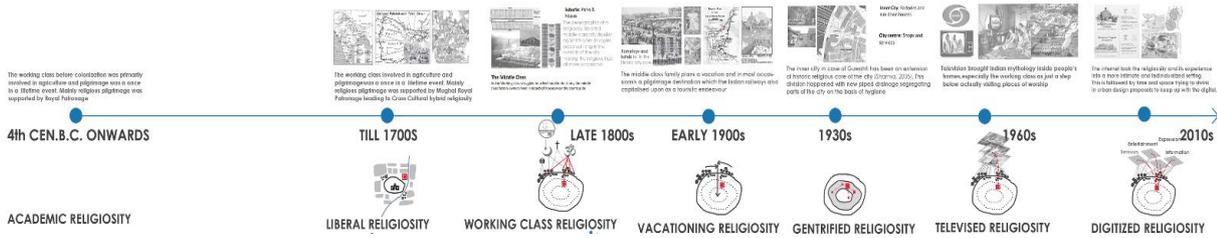


Fig. 1. How transformation of religiosity has been both individualising and promoting global access (©Anubhav Borgohain, 2021)

Research questions posed by the thesis

- 1) Can the digital realm as a supplementary lens help understand the current state of historic religious precincts, their religious character, and cultures? If yes then how?
- 2) What opportunities does the digital realm provide to conserve (and make adaptable) the mentioned character and cultures?

Methodology

In essence, the thesis wants to inform the project, not only from the material conditions of the religious precinct, but by mapping the socio-cultural and socio-spatial processes within and associated with the precinct. The methodology is then presented as a combination of analogue and digital methods for reading religious heritage sites.

The analogue reading uses the theory of Lefebvre's three moments of social space comprising, the lived, conceived, and the perceived³.

Henri Lefebvre's three moments of social space-

- a) Lived- bringing out everyday practice cultures, using observational surveys, interviews and literature on the precinct's religious cultures.
- b) Conceived- identifying programs derived out of intangible aspects such as mythology and social networks through analysis of chronological cycles/events and historical evolution.
- c) Perceived- visually mapping spatial manifestation of human intervention such as temples, houses, etc.

While digital reading consists of mapping web-related characteristics and issues pertaining to the site, through social media platforms (like Twitter in this context) which denote the fourth moment of space⁴ [space of flows⁵] (Castells, M. 1991; Liang, X. Lu, Y. and Martin, J. 2020). The metadata is borrowed from the platform, namely 'twitter #hashtag' generated by regular users who have some relationship with the site.

³ See Lefebvre, H. (1991, p. 222). The production of space. Blackwell. Chp-1 and 2 for more information about Lefebvre's theory of social space <https://iberian-connections.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The-production-of-space-by-Henri-Lefebvre-translated-by-Donald-Nicholson-Smith.pdf>.

⁴ See Schaick, J. (2009). Shift towards networks: integrating social and physical subsystems of the city through stratified models for more information on comparison between Lefebvre's social space and Castells' space of flows. <https://archive.nordes.org/index.php/n13/article/download/226/209>.

⁵ Courtesy Castells, M. (1996) The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture – Volume 1: The Rise of the Network Society. Oxford: Blackwell.

Manuel Castells' addition of space of flows as Fourth moment of social space.

- d) When we move into the digital realm, we come across multiple flows of information, facilitating activities of the real world projected into them. Considering these flows as currency for analyzing the site becomes integral in bringing out active issues pertaining to the site, in terms of visitor's experience, both good and bad. Now we just have to tap into these voices floating in the vacuum of digital and make use of them as feedback mechanisms. These mechanisms, then, accompanied by new digital services catering to the needs of the precinct, become a contemporary forum. These forums then supplement the original social forums, like Akhara6, Gram Sabha or Panchayat7. Then a comparison is run with the findings of the analogue mode and is overlapped with digital reading to reinforce the findings.

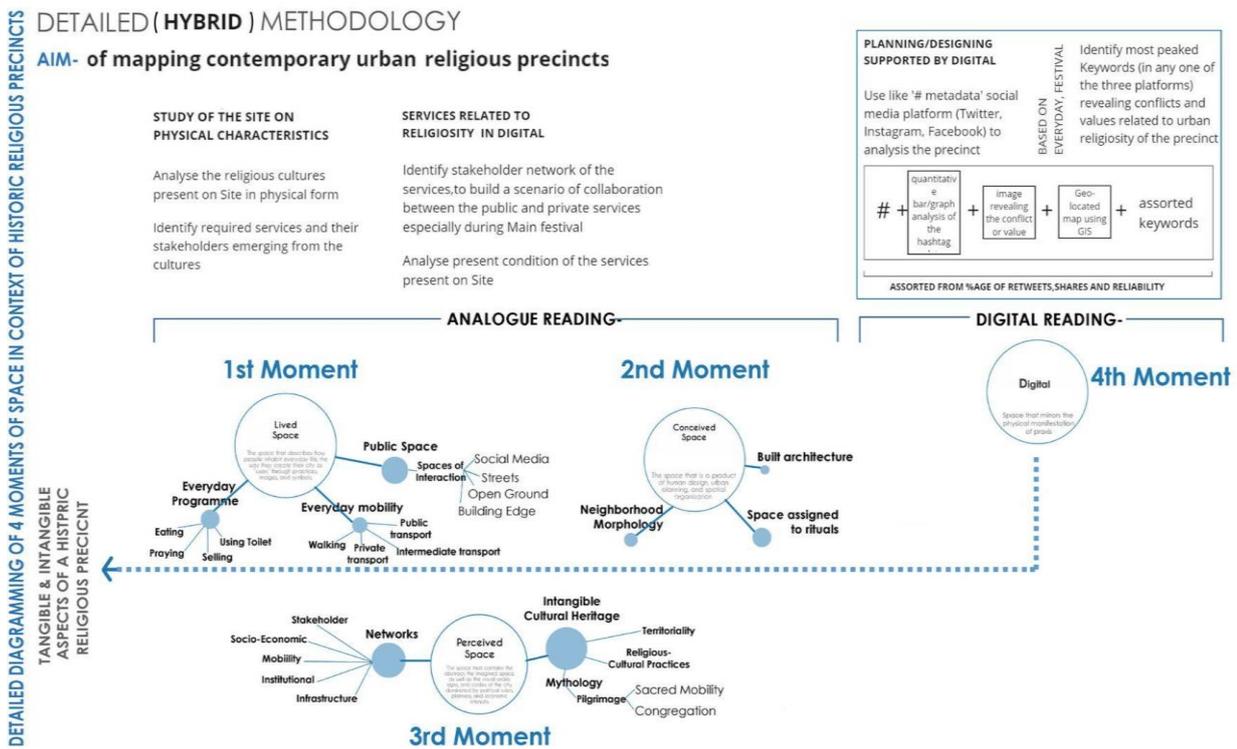


Fig. 2. Detailed hybrid methodology to read religious precincts (©Anubhav Borgohain, 2021)

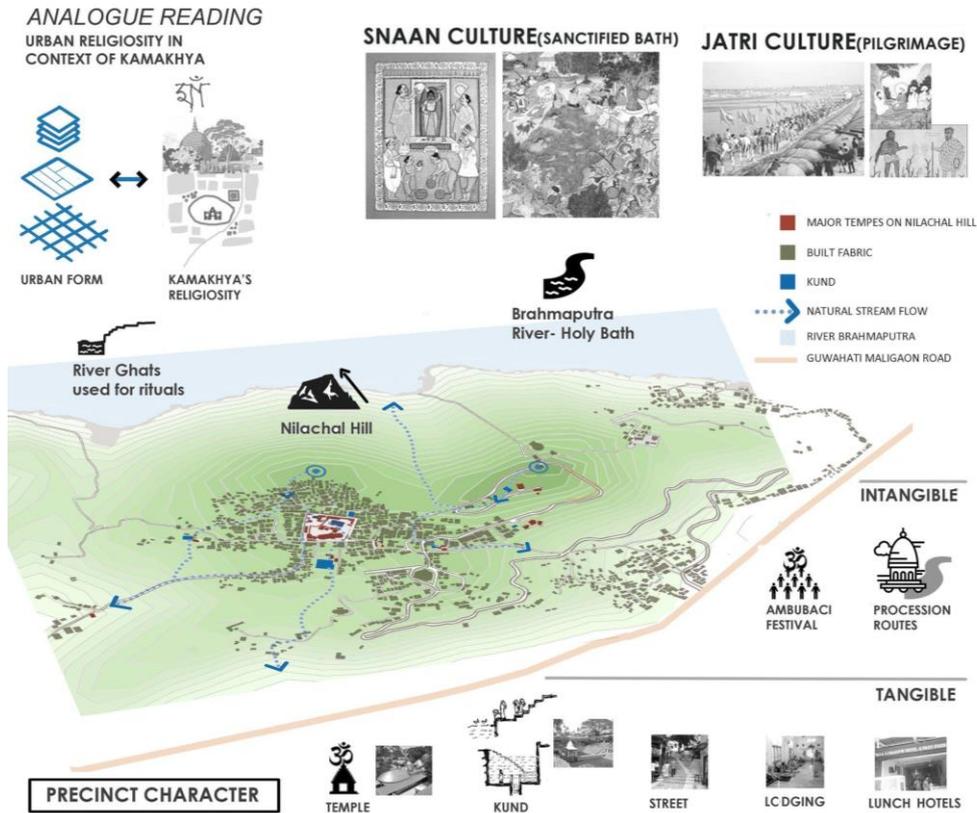
Site based revelations

To test this methodology's practicability, an important religious centre in terms of Tantric and Sakta religious tradition, Kamakhya Temple, is chosen; which is situated in Guwahati city. The Nilachal Hill, on which Kamakhya temple resides, finds its place in ancient Indian mythology such as the Mahabharata, where figures like Vashistha Muni and Shankaracharya led rituals near the temple premise. From being identified by the central government-funded schemes such as PRASAD, ASI monuments listing, GARUDA, and now the smart city plan, multiple imaginations are projected on

⁶ Akhara stands for a place of debate. See more at What Is Hinduism?: Modern Adventures Into A Profound Global Faith. Himalayan Academy Publications. 2007. p. 244.

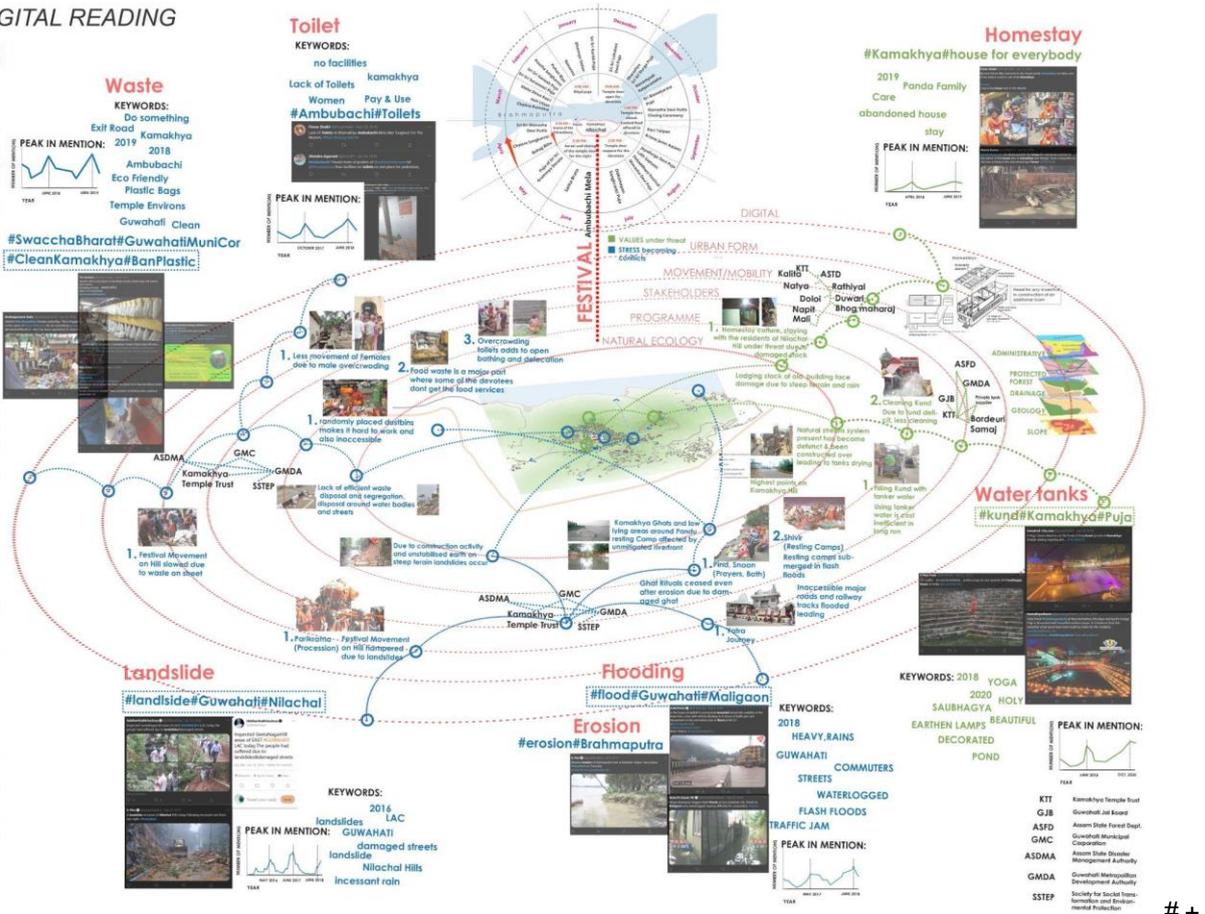
⁷ The word "Panchayat" means assembly (ayat) of five (panch) and raj means "rule". Traditionally Panchayats consisted of elderly and wise people chosen by the local community, who used to settle disputes between individuals and villages. See more at pria.org@2018 https://www.pria.org/panchayathub/panchayat_text_view.php

the Kamakhya Nilachal precinct. As the nature of patronage has transformed into a state-driven practice, the intensive publicity and digital campaigning for the Ambubachi Mela seeps into social media platforms such as Twitter and attracts millions of devotees to share their experiences. In turn, global accessibility has increased, but the footfall has also increased exponentially, increasing pressure on existing infrastructure (Das, S. 2017). With this, the issues related to the micro-cultures present on site (which sprouted in different eras) have been overlooked at the Kamakhya-Nilachal precinct.



DIGITAL READING

IDENTIFYING ISSUES PRESENT IN AMBUBACHI FESTIVAL THROUGH #(hashtag)



Quantitative bar graph + image revealing the conflict/value + Geolocated conflict/value + assorted keyword

ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN SITE SHIFTED TO DIGITAL REALM -

EXPERIENTIAL ASPECTS

Live videos of specific areas at specific times
Using editing to produce video documentary



TRANSACTIONAL ASPECTS

Monetized Site Tours,
Online Darshan through lives stream, E puja by sending prasad items post



NAVIGATIONAL ASPECTS

Online navigatory forums of gov and private nature, also travel related info



EXPRESSIONAL ASPECTS

Online communities
Expression of talent
commenting social issues through site



Fig. 3. Kamakhya religious precinct under Analogue and Digital mode of reading and analyzing (©Anubhav Borgohain, 2021)

Act of collaborative intervening

Realisation occurs that beyond strategies, there lies a liberation from static plans. The plan itself can become the social forum of development, by transforming into a participatory and interactive entity (Khan, Z. 2017). So, a sample structure of the Interactive Design Plan (IDP) is created, by channelling existing community forums present in physical forms within the precinct, with a participating crowd of devotees, tourists and residents of Kamakhya to self guide into different intervention programmes and exercises. All of this is enabled once again by the cyber-interface (Web-app), which is easily downloadable into smartphones and even guides enthusiastic participants to be involved in designing around precinct issues. Also, tourists can now be linked with

the efficient ecology of services present in the precinct through a single platform. This frees the designer to employ a collective mind to analyze, design and execute on an urban level through participatory forum (IDP).

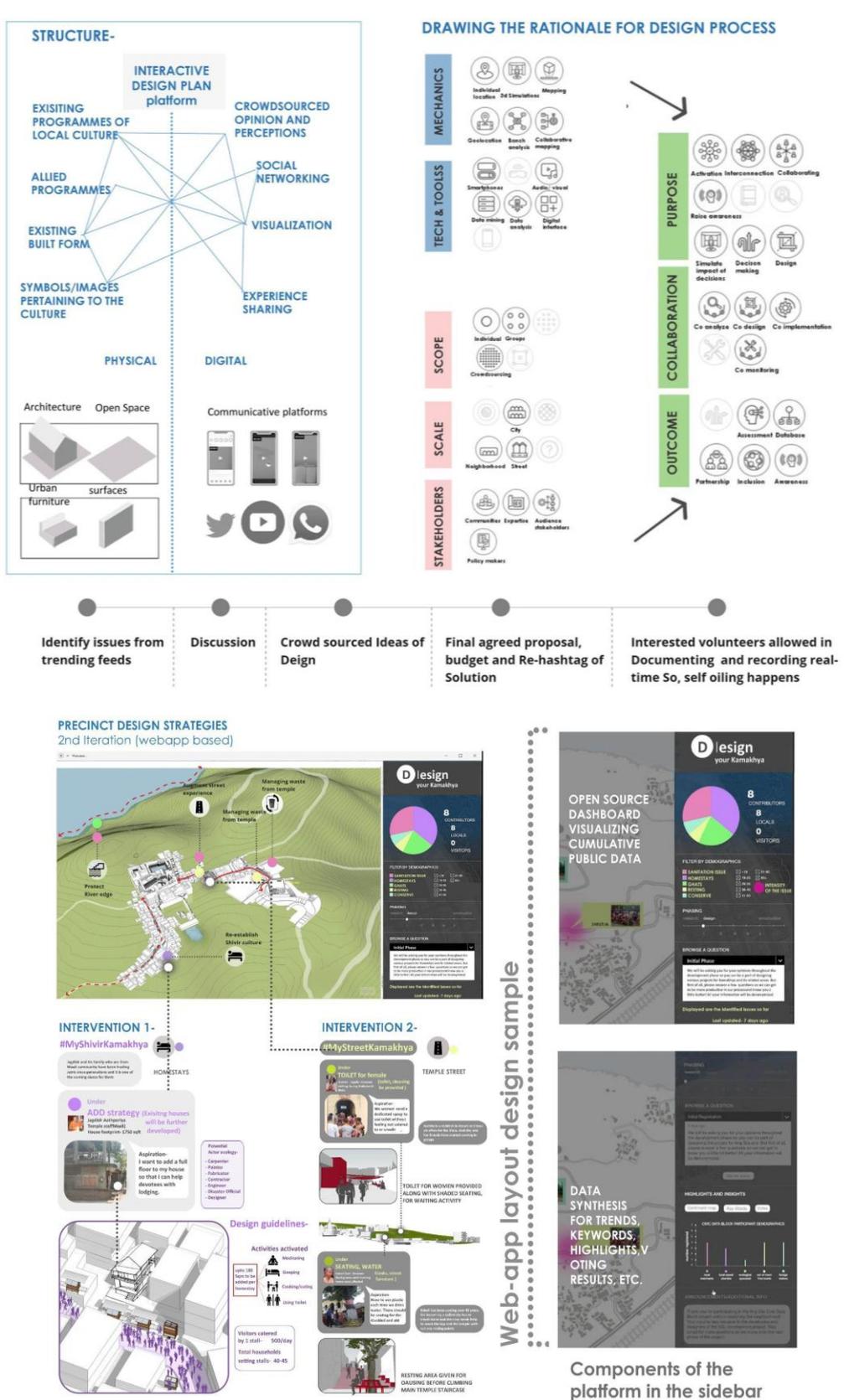


Fig. 4. IDP framework/rationale; homestay and street project intervention sample (©Anubhav Borgohain, 2021)

Conclusion

The purpose of this research paper is to re-establish values of religious heritage in the public domain, which in this scenario was intrinsically inspired by eastern philosophy, i.e. the function and ritual projected on a space is more important than the building. Keeping this in mind, the philosophy also entertains the idea of impermanence and temporality but knows the importance of repair-reuse. This can be very clearly seen in the religious rituals manifesting in movement through a path and cycles of sacred time. For the study to establish the importance of value, an IDP is introduced. IDP is a dynamic forum, a step ahead of the local area plan, where the intrinsic character of the precinct flourishes and also provides for universal access (on a global level) to experience and participate in the aforementioned character of the Kamakhya precinct. It is suggested that this platform should work in a hybrid form since the physical experience and dialogue with the precinct only can bring in productive feedback. Along with feedback, an ecology of diverse stakeholders also needs to be brought out and utilised.

The research enables a high possibility of a collaborative data mining process which can be undertaken by centrally funded schemes such as the GARUDA scheme, where institutions like the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati's data repository could be frontrunners in the case of the Kamakhya religious precinct.

As designers, our role can now evolve into being orchestrators of collective design thinking. Also, simultaneously multiple projects can keep on happening through this forum at different scales but interlocked with Kamakhya's religious cultures and related practices.

Conflict of Interests Disclosure

Privacy and use of sensitive public data (related to site interventions) can become an issue. The absence of a comprehensive stakeholder study will hinder the idea of cross-pollination. The development of gentrification in this precinct has been given less priority, which may affect the participatory model created by the author to be practically adopted by the precinct. Due to its nascent stage, the hashtag method of analysing conflicts/values might get corrupted through bias from a particular community with more media influence.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Anubhav Borgohain

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Software: Anubhav Borgohain

Supervision: George Jacob, Manoj Parmar

Visualization: Anubhav Borgohain

Writing – original draft: Anubhav Borgohain

Writing – review & editing: Anubhav Borgohain, Sandeep Menon, Rohan Shivkumar

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