

# Species of Theses and Other Pieces

**Issue Editors**

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# PERFORMANCE

## Migrant Imaginaries through Soft Spatialities

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**Abstract:** This research documents the encounters of the built fabric with migrant imaginaries. It observes the articulation of social narratives, cultural practices, and everyday rituals within diasporic communities ordered around textiles. Migrant spaces often include »soft« architectures in both the literal construction of their spaces and through the »soft« spatial systems tied to certain micro-transactions and community organizations. The work explores ways of engaging with participatory research methods through the dynamic and performative nature of people, objects, rituals, symbols, and knowledge. The performative practices layered onto this work activate inclusive and ethical forms of enquiring and representing information. The work further develops a repertoire of rituals and events ordered around textiles.

**Keywords:** Migrant Spaces; Soft Architecture; De-Colonized Knowledge; Inclusive Ethnography; Performative Methods.

### Introduction

The soft spatialities of migrant communities are highlighted in this article through the narratives described in *italics*.

An old family album of photographs shared with me over a dining table highlights intimate moments and small re-enactments of rituals brought by grandparents and great grandparents as they created their home (fig. 1). Traversing the streets, yards, balconies, and home, one notices the adaptations and re-creations of tactile and ephemeral memorabilia and the values of migrant agendas. This is seen in the manner in which they furnished the house, their pictures, and music (»qawwali«), the games that they played ( »five stones«, »dayakatti« or »gulli danda«), and the textiles draped, worn, and stored ( »misars« and beautifully embroidered »dupattas«). The yards are adorned with fabrics, with clothes hanging from washing lines, huge pots ( »dekhs«) on open





1.

*Visual representation of the interview process with the Amijee family in the home.*  
*Collage: Amina Kaskar, 2021.*

fires and tables laid with foods and spices. Family-owned shops that sell fruit, vegetables, and flowers and shops lined with blankets, textiles, and clothing adjoin the homes and spill onto the street. The shop re-creates the domestic space, lined with curtains and styled pointedly to display the aspirations of the home. The streets with their splendor of colors, textures, and smells are shrouded by ethnic blankets, fabrics, and paraphernalia that reveal migrant imaginaries and the multiplicity of cultures and practices that exist in the city. [15 October, 2020, Amijee House, Mayfair West, Johannesburg, South Africa]

Migrants often shape spaces through various forms of temporal space-making. They appropriate space by interacting with movable objects, such as textiles, arranging them in imaginative and creative ways. There is a bridging of past and future infrastructure as they import material cultures from a distant »homeland«. Re-creating these traditions in new and blended forms to adapt to a new local context, making a new home within the city. This is done by re-using material constructions and by reforming and resituating connections with others (Johung 2012). Butler (1988: 519) defines this notion of performativity through a repeated set of propelling acts that become customary over time. This is evident within the city as specific rituals become common practice within ethnic communities. These rituals are performances that constitute or become representative of identity. There are a myriad of cultural forms and approaches within grounded architecture as well as within transitory, mobile, and ritual experiences. These practices form a legitimate and valuable architecture of the city by both impeding and supporting solid architectural forms tied to the built fabric (Ingold 2010: 138–147).

This work explores ways of engaging with the dynamic and performative nature of people, objects, rituals, symbols and knowledge. The methodology used in this research aims to investigate »soft« architectural methods and material practices created by textiles in migrant spheres. As described by Kaskar (2021: 108) »amongst the diverse materials that migrants have carried with them, textiles play an important role in the material practices of migrant identities«. Not only do textiles provide insight into the performances of everyday ritual practices within the built environment, they are also historical markers, design agents, and political instruments that highlight the performative nature of cultural spaces. This material artefact is intrinsically tied to »social and labour networks, micro-transactions and community organizations« (Kaskar 2021: 108). Textiles are further linked to the cultural,

social, religious and political agency of people who have experienced dislocation. This is particularly evident in their daily customs, such as eating, cooking, and praying (Altman/Low 1992). These everyday rituals, gestures, and habits seep into the hard-built fabric, bringing with them a spatial language with new codes and agendas.

A performance lens focuses on cultural activities, recognizing embodied experiences and how certain bodies and sites overlap in order for meaningful experiences to be initialized and reinstated (Diamond 1996). »Performance« is more than the tectonic and practical functions of a building. It entails the unfolding of human activity in space and the »impact of these social forces on architectural and urban patterns« (Heynen 2013: 349). The theatrical aspect of performance includes space-making and the »theatre of practice« where materials and people are inter-woven and »act« upon each other to conceive spatial arrangements (Ingold 2010). Textiles are part of a durational performance with their own trajectories and tendencies. The social nature of textiles allow them to be continuously assembled and re-assembled in a myriad of ways over time to produce new spatial configurations (Latour 2005: 63–68). Textiles exist in both the public realm, as well as within nuanced moments of household practices and communal appropriations. These are observed by »the hanging of tablecloths on washing lines, the shops draped in textile merchandise, blankets laid out onto the floor for social gathering and the fabrics that adorn homes« (Kaskar 2021: 109). Textiles are embedded with the »needs, desires, aspirations, behaviour and actions« of migrants (Kaskar 2021: 109). The social and cultural reproduction continues as migrants make, sell, use and celebrate different forms of fabric. Although soft architecture loses its newness, degrades, and is often either recycled or discarded, it still remains an important dynamic of something continuous and more enduring. It speaks to the speculative nature of textiles as it is able to create improvised temporal events that change and weather over time. Textiles have an ongoing narrative as they are continuously re-located and changing, opening up to contemporary culture and future speculation.

This article investigates how these soft spatial practices are defined through methods. It is important for the methods used to address the challenges of working with diasporic space and the material entanglements of migrant lives. They are often located within contested or vulnerable sites, and the nature of their spaces are transient as people are on the move. This research includes searching for a method as part of the process of what Law





2.

*Visual representation of the interview process with the Bulbulia sisters in their curtain shop. Collage: Amina Kaskar, 2021.*

(2004: 390–410) calls the »messiness of the social world of the city«. The aim is to capture »fleeting, ephemeral and often embodied and sensory aspects of the movement of people and objects« (Spinney 2011: 161–182). This includes the integration of soft performative spatial systems with soft performative methods.

It challenges conventional forms of architecture and explains the »erasure of the unseen due to its non-normative materiality and tight disciplinary boundary« (Kaskar 2021:105). It is important to visualize the things that migrants use or carry, as this makes visible the expertise and agency employed by individuals in creating their own spaces. The mapping of long histories, exchanges, and networks of people and textiles address the global situation of the migrant identity. How does the migrant navigate the space between diverse contexts and identities? Are there specific objects and processes that assist in navigating the »here and there« and the multiple roles that migrants need to enact in order to prosper?

The approach to the fieldwork is inclusive and ethical in the manner of enquiring and representing information. This is done through the involvement of new and varied architectural references and narrators. It values the various lived experiences and environments built by migrants. It is important that these voices are not veiled or expunged in the work, and rather considered as »productive and interpretive lenses« (Kaskar 2021:107). As suggested by Siddiqi (2011) the concept of »togethering differences« entails a way of living and philosophizing communally, which challenges forms of »othering«. It is further argued that »migratory objects and methods can bring about new perspectives through collaborative processes that enrich the writing of architectural histories« (Kaskar 2021: 107). The ethics of collaboration are defined by the intimacies and distances between agents that come across two-fold in this method:

1. the relationship of human bodies and the positionality of the researcher relating to intimate versus distant relationships with participants and the imposed effect on the knowledge outputs.
2. the relationship of textiles and human bodies and the value of embodied ephemeral knowledge in the way textiles interact with human and built forms.



### Intimate/personal

A day spent with the Bulbulia sisters in their shop at the Oriental Plaza seated on plastic chairs surrounded by organza and lace curtains eating »chevro«, a spiced nut and cornflake mix, out of an ice-cream container and sharing a 2 liter Coca Cola (fig. 2). The time is shared with stories of their family life and memories of assisting their father in the shop and playing in the streets with the neighbors' kids. There is a short pause to perform the daily midday prayer, Dhohr Salaah, in a corner of the store. Their brother listens in from behind the counter. Later, women from neighboring shops join the dialogue. [06 October, 2020, Curtain Centre, Oriental Plaza, Fordsburg, Johannesburg, South Africa] (Kaskar 2021:106)

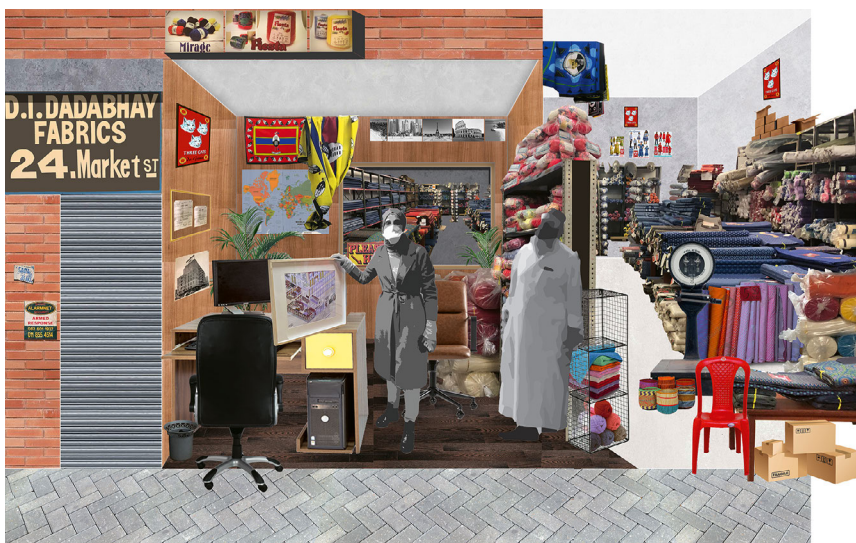
The interview process depicts societal and physical behaviors that are common to the spatial practices evident in migrant communities. The interactions between the participants are similar to those of a social gathering or being hosted at someone's home. The discussion transcends that of academic investigation and becomes a shared space for dialogue. Furniture is strategically positioned and moved around the room to best serve the conversation. The immediate setting of the interview reveals the mechanics of how people choreograph their environments to support different types of purposes and agendas. By representing the spatial arrangements of the enquiry process through drawing and collage, the manners and rituals of the interview can be illustrated. The intimacy of the interactions are translated in the way that the furniture is arranged; plastic stools huddled together, blanket mounds crowding the room, a delineated cashier counter or the comfort of a ceremonial dining-room table. These arrangements dictate the duration spent with the participants within their homes and shops. The entire day can be spent engaged in conversation and observing everyday activities. Situating the interview within the natural setting of the participants allows for impromptu collaborations with passers-by and other »guests«. They either pull up a seat and eagerly add to the conversation with personal anecdotes and lived experiences, or they casually engage with the people around them through their usual familial exchanges.

Textiles are immersed in the scenario through customary habits and practices. Textiles play an important role in ordering the space of the interview – »there is an emotional closeness with the material as it is purposefully prepared and choreographed by its user« (Kaskar 2021: 109). The flexibility of the fabric allows it to occupy space in various ways, either hung from the ceiling, stretched out on the floor, draped loosely over one's body or stretched

to conform to multiple shapes (Thomas 2001). The material micro-scenarios of the interviews allude to the role textiles play in other forms of diasporic space-making. This can be seen in the spatial ordering of many defining moments in life, such as the birth of a child, initiations, weddings and funerals. In addition, it plays a significant role in gendered activities, especially in relation to domestic crafts. The embodied historical and emotional knowledge of the fabric adds an ethereality to the seemingly conventional nature of the material (Kaskar 2021:109).

The intimacy demonstrated by the material aspects of this space is further reinforced by the closeness between, and similar background of, the researcher to the participants. This allows the interviewer to take on multiple roles in the interaction as a granddaughter, neighbor or confidante. This association establishes trust and initiates an expanded network of potential participants within the community. The familiarity with some of the customs and colloquial language reinforces the emotional and subjective nature of the interviews and its outputs. This is often not considered by established frames of knowledge. The interviews reveal a »temporally layered unfolding of space that is influenced by intangible factors such as rumour, emotion, smell, sound, memory and perceived atmosphere« (Kaskar 2021:106). The participants collectively shape and re-formulate the perception of existing sites by providing diverse perspectives and accounts. This enriches the complexity of existing historic sites by layering onto them a range of subjectivities (Stein/Rowden 2019: 29–35). These personal oral histories add crucial value to how people understand and experience space beyond permanent markers of occupation (Kaskar 2021: 106).

The intimacy of the encounters creates a subconscious bias in the filtering and selection of information from the audio recording of interview sessions. It is thus difficult to enlist a third party to transcribe interviews. The jargon used, the pauses in conversation, and unexpected interruptions contribute to this. A hands-on approach is a useful way of working with qualitative data. The use of automated or digital over manual processing distances the researcher from the process. This may yield a different set of results if the interviews are processed through a data software program.



3.  
*Visual representation of the interview process with the owners of »D. I. Dadabhay Fabrics« in their textile warehouse. Collage: Amina Kaskar, 2021.*

## Detached/distant

Streets lined with men on chairs. There is an awkwardness and uneasiness in a male-dominated space with many foreign-national traders. There is a distrust that is extended toward the researcher as an outsider. The smaller shop-owners are more hesitant, conversing for brief moments on the street between draped facades, or in their shops over colorful blankets stacked from floor to ceiling. The larger shop owners often extend an invitation into their offices or a quieter section of the store among a landscape of paraphernalia – stacked fabrics, adorned mannequins, and baskets full of haberdashery, bags, and clothing. [22 October, 2020, Newtown, Johannesburg, South Africa]

There is a continuous movement of new migrants entering established ethnic spaces lured by the profitability of trade in textiles. These unfamiliar spaces are intimidating, closed-off, and defensive toward the researcher as an outsider in the space. The streets and shops are bustling and people are not always keen to slow down and engage with research agendas. It is not always safe to walk around with cameras and people are hesitant to be photographed. However, once trust is gained, the researcher is invited in and there is comfort in the hospitality of the people, sharing stories over tea or a hot meal.

Being hosted translates the role of the researcher into that of a guest. This ensuing caring environment contributes to an ambiguous power structure. This highlights the agency, awareness, and the value of migrant communities refuting their marginal and vulnerable status. In this way, the usual model of »us« helping »them« is subverted (Kaskar 2021: 107). This raises the questions: What can the researcher give back to the community in lieu of the knowledge gained? What is the incentive for people to participate, and how valuable is it for them?

## Legacies

Sitting in the office of D. I. Dadabhay's fabrics, I am handed a bound memoir of the Dadabhay family and their business. They share old photographs of the building and refer me to the family tree and collected histories on the family website. It is intriguing how this information is exhibited in their homes and shops – a map of Gujarat, original trading licenses, title deeds and watercol-

or paintings hanging in thin gold frames (fig. 3). [20 October, 2020, D. I. Dada-bhay's Fabrics, Newtown, Johannesburg, South Africa]

It is becoming popular among 3rd and 4th generation migrants to document their family histories and biographies. They are proud to share this knowledge as it speaks to their family legacies and achievements in overcoming the struggles commonly faced by migrants. A lot of these histories are lost with no material evidence of their existence. However, many families proudly display watercolor paintings of their homes and businesses that have been gifted by architects and artists who have worked in the area. In recognition of this tradition and as a gesture of gratitude, drawings of their personal spaces are gifted to the participants as a testament to their family history (Kaskar 2021:107).

The encounters generated by interviews and participant observation produce a discursive space that doubles the architectural or spatial outputs. The intricacies of dialogue have value beyond factual accuracy. The character of the interaction is invariably tidied-up when translated into text or visuals and is at risk of being lost when presented in public. Drawing is important in capturing the spatial aspects of dialogue. In addition to distinguishing the tectonic and practical »performance« of a building, they provide atmospheric qualities of space. The drawings capture the »soft« systems layered onto space and serve as a powerful physical gesture in revealing parts of migrant histories that have been lost or rendered invisible (Kaskar 2021: 107). The legacy of these families and communities are solidified through the longevity of the drawings that can be passed down through generations.

## Conclusion

Migrants have prescribed an alternative spatial language that allows for improvisation and disrupts rationalized and oppressive built forms. This research shifts away from conventional methods and representation and explores new ways of capturing the performative nature of buildings, sites, and design processes through the layering of »soft« spatial systems. It creates a new language of architectural practice that is textured and dynamic in representation. The visual language evokes sentimental feelings in the viewer so that they can place themselves in the environment with its familiar smells, textures, and colors. In a world of re-location, practices of migrant

spatiality constitute alternative spatial languages and agency that transcend architectural limits and encompass non-normative materialities.

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