

5. From working-class cultivation to non-commercialized social interactions

The evolving social role of modernist public spaces in an Indian industrial city

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Introduction

Modernist architecture and urbanism have often faced criticism for their perceived rigidity and failure to capture the complex dynamics of urban social life. They are frequently depicted as products of top-down control with little regard for lived experience (Jacobs, 1961; Tafuri, [1973] 1976; Scott, 1998; Sennett, 2010). However, recent scholarship on post-war urban modernism, recognizing the multiplicity of its initial aims and afterlives, seeks to nuance and decolonize such generalizations (Kulić et al. 2014; Swenarton et al., 2015; Kordas, 2018). This chapter contributes to this growing body of work by focusing on the public spaces designed in the early 1970s in Bokaro Steel City in line with modernist principles of urban planning. Bokaro, a planned industrial city in eastern India, was built in conjunction with the massive Bokaro Steel Plant – one of Asia's largest, constructed with Soviet support. Conceived as part of one of the largest national new town programmes (Glover, 2012: 108) and of a national social modernization agenda (Parry, 2020: 7–9), the city and its public spaces were intentionally designed by Indian urban professionals to foster an urban working-class model town and to shape patterns of collective life and citizenry in postcolonial India. In this chapter I demonstrate that the functionality of Bokaro's built environment endures amid the drastic socio-economic changes of the last decades. This interplay has led to contingencies in the social role these spaces play today.

Since the 1990s, Indian urban development has shifted towards neoliberal economic strategies, resulting in reduced state-provided social security and

greater autonomy for the public company managing Bokaro's land and facilities. Despite these market-driven reconfigurations, Bokaro's urban design has exhibited a notable resilience: The city's built environment has consistently adapted to provide essential public goods, especially to the city's vulnerable populations. In functioning as a social buffer, the city's originally planned environments mitigate today's inequalities brought about by neoliberal transitions. By focusing on the city's past and future urban development, this research repositions modernist urbanism as a dynamic legacy in the present-day urban landscape.

By analysing Bokaro's historical public spaces in flux, I explore how their social role has been changed: from sustaining the city's working-class character to providing space for affordable recreation and non-commercialized social relations. The contingency in the social role of these public spaces, I argue, is made possible by their enduring sociality. Amid significant socio-economic transformation and the rise of commercialized, exclusionary venues such as policed shopping malls, modernist public spaces no longer function precisely as their planners intended. Originally designed to cultivate an aspirational, forward-looking urban working class and foster collective sociality, these modernist public spaces persist in offering leisure as a public, collective good. Today, these older spaces predominantly serve those excluded from the city's commodified centres of consumption. While they may no longer epitomize the postcolonial future its planners once envisioned, these spaces have become refuges that maintain and reflect the city's working-class identity within a landscape increasingly dominated by neoliberal values and market-driven urban change. By analysing the evolving social role of Bokaro's historical public spaces, I argue that a remarkable robustness of the planned city's design has maintained Bokaro's ability to provide essential public goods, despite pressures from commodification and market-driven changes.

The empirical findings presented here challenge dominant critiques of modernist urban planning by showing that these historical urban structures are not socially static or exclusively geared towards control. Thus, instead of adopting the prevalent stance in mainstream literature, which views modernist urban planning as a 'top-down' enterprise judged in terms of success or failure (Tafari, [1973] 1976; Scott, 1998) – and which is echoed by numerous scholars, such as Nandy (2003) and Roy (2007) in the Indian context – this chapter instead attends to the enduring elements and nuanced legacies of Bokaro's public spaces. It asks what forms of social relations were envisioned and produced through state-led modernist planning, and why. Further, it

explores how these social relations continue to inform the urban landscape and everyday life of Bokaro today. Hence, it offers new perspectives on how the built environment can inform urban landscapes in ways that go beyond the original intentions of political institutions.

My study takes inspiration from the philosopher Boris Groys (2019), who has argued that modernist developments operate primarily on the level of the material base – meaning the material, physical conditions and environments of society – rather than on the superstructure level, that is, the abstract ideas and cultural narratives constructed upon those material foundations. Consequently, this analysis delves into the material structures of Bokaro, tracing their evolving social roles over time. To theorize these shifting dynamics, I draw on Henri Lefebvre’s concept of ‘social space’, which foregrounds the ways in which urban spaces are produced and continually transformed through social relations and historical processes. ‘Social space’ is a historical social form, a product or a work of a certain social formation (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991: 412; Ahuja, 2009: 25–26), a set of relations that inherently echo the social interactions of different groups. The concept underscores that space is never empty or neutral but both produced and re-produced (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991: 36). Unlike natural spaces, social spaces, according to Lefebvre, are deeply intertwined with social relations, property relations, and land control mechanisms (Ibid.: 81–85) – an observation which will be crucial for our analysis. Lefebvre underlined the importance of material reality (ibid.: 68–77), which, despite being remoulded and transformed under changing urban realities, never disappears completely (ibid.: 164–65, 229, 412). Historically contingent social space therefore cannot be completely eliminated, even by the most powerful players. Forms, functions or other elements will necessarily persist: ‘no space disappears in the course of growth and development’ (ibid.: 86). As spaces evolve, they adapt to contemporary pressures yet still embody their historical contexts, as noted by thinkers such as David Harvey (1990). This conceptual lens provides us with a comprehensive understanding of how past urban future-making affects the present urban landscape.

This socio-historical analysis of Bokaro’s space is grounded in ethnographic research conducted over two months of fieldwork in 2023. That work allowed me to contextualize concepts and practices of public spaces, urbanism, and modernism. The necessity of a historical approach to ethnography, which involves not only field observation but also in-depth exploration of the city’s historical narratives and material landscape (Low, 2017: 36–38), soon became evident during the fieldwork. A historical perspective was present

in key documents on Bokaro's public spaces, such as the General Plan of the City (1969–70), the Master Approach Plan (1974), and photographs from 1997 – all provided by Dipankar Das, the former deputy general manager in the Architecture and City Planning Department at the Steel Authority of India Limited (the public company responsible for Indian steel production, hereafter SAIL). The 2023 fieldwork combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photography, and field notes to collect information on the current state of public spaces and was enriched by conversations with site workers and visitors.

In the next section, I explore the broader debate over the interplay between architecture and political power, with a particular focus on whether material structures can maintain social traits even after the political frameworks that created them vanish. Following that, I analyse the implicit and explicit ideologies embedded in Bokaro's historical design and its public spaces, seeking to uncover the intended social interactions the urban space was meant to foster. I then discuss how public spaces served as cornerstones of Bokaro's social agenda, then continue by examining their social performance today and investigating their evolving social role in the current urban conjuncture. Subsequently, I analyse the contingencies of the social functionality in Bokaro's public spaces, highlighting unexpected ways in which these environments continue to inform the city's landscape. I also discuss how Lefebvre's notion of social space contributes to understanding the endurance and transformation of Bokaro's historical built environment amid shifting political-economic conditions. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the evolving social role of historical public spaces over time, in juxtaposition to influential critiques of modernist urban planning.

Beyond political scaffolding: The enduring rationales of the modernist built environment

In the post-World War II reconstruction era, planned industrial cities were widely viewed by governments as blueprints for the future and vital instruments of desired social transformation (Alexander and Buchli, 2007). The so-called new town movement emerged as a prominent urban planning strategy in the mid-20th century and was characterized by the proliferation of entirely new urban settlements on previously undeveloped sites, often built according to comprehensive plans and with intended social, economic, and

architectural goals. Its settlements, as efforts to address rapid urbanization, housing shortages, and social reform, embodied the promise of universal progress and modernist ideals, including affordable housing, equal rights in urban spaces, spacious planning, integrated sanitation, functional spaces, and ample green areas. The movement's 'golden' age is generally seen as spanning from 1945 to 1975 (Wakeman, 2016: 1), a period during which planned towns became a favoured solution across continents (Strange, 2019; Crimson Historians and Urbanists, forthcoming).

A robust body of criticism has challenged the premises and outcomes of state-led urbanism. Early on, Manfredo Tafuri's influential *Architecture and Utopia* (Tafuri, [1973] 1976) argued that the utopian aspirations of modernist urban design would inevitably become entangled with the logics of capital and state power, portraying modernism's social optimism as a naive attempt to solve social problems, detached from historical and political-economic realities. Similarly, Henri Lefebvre, in *The Urban Revolution* ([1970] 2003) and *The Production of Space* ([1974] 1991), critiqued both capitalist and state socialist urban planning for their faith in rationally ordering social needs into neatly segregated spatial functions (Stanek 2015, 121; Lefebvre, [1974] 1991: 55). Lefebvre's perspectives aligned with contemporary French theorists such as Michel Foucault, who considered state-led urbanism as a tool of social control (Stanek, 2015: 125). These foundational critiques informed later post-structuralist analyses, most notably James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998), which argued that modernist planning prioritized legibility, efficiency, and administrative order over the complexity of lived urban experience, often resulting in rigid and inflexible urban spaces. According to Michael Kordas (2018), this dominant critical perspective paints post-war modernist planning as rigidly technocratic and socially disengaged, a view that continues to influence both scholarship and public discourse regarding the shortcomings of modernist urbanism.

A key assumption in this critical debate is that modernist urban products were primarily vehicles for state power, and therefore often viewed by scholars as a political representation, prioritizing control over social vitality and therefore holding little contemporary relevance. As Nick Beech insightfully concludes from analysing scholarship on modernist urbanism, dominant accounts often frame the state as operating outside and above both polity and architecture, with architecture serving merely as a neutral 'medium that the state can mobilize' for its aims (Beech, 2014: 196). Other recent studies also view these dominant accounts as reductive. Rather than seeing the modernist built

environment as simply mirroring political influence, the studies argue that architecture should be seen as an active instrument of social modernization and power, deployed to physically construct and periodically reproduce certain social systems (Molnár, 2013; Beech, 2014). This line of research calls into question the assumption that modernist material structures are secondary to political institutions, instead highlighting how the former can facilitate the spatial reproduction of specific social relations even after the political structures that produced them have vanished.

To analyse the social role of modernist architecture, it is essential first to understand what constitutes its social dimension. Numerous historical studies have investigated the social relations embedded in modernist urbanities and planned cities around the globe. Architectural historians have provided nuanced readings of developments in architectural form and practice in, for instance, the former GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, highlighting the intricacies of state-led urban housing projects (Zarecor, 2011; Molnár, 2013). The ambitions of the UK's new towns to unite social classes and create balanced communities, along with the relationship between the built environment and the welfare state, have long been examined in critical scholarship (Heraud 1968; Frampton 1985). After a long hiatus, the relationship between the welfare state and the built environment in Western Europe has only recently been re-examined, marking a significant scholarly return to this topic (Swenarton et al., 2015). Complementing these perspectives, studies have also investigated the development of a small working-class city near Detroit, with well-equipped housing for Ford factory workers (McCulloch, 2023). Collectively, these studies illustrate the global endeavour to embed social considerations within a historical understanding of modernist urban planning.

The debate over the contemporary relevance of modernist built environments, particularly of planned cities, has become a subject of growing scholarly interest, especially in post-socialist urban studies. Despite the dissolution of the political institutions that founded state socialist cities, the built environment of these cities continues to significantly impact the contemporary urban landscape, as scholars such as Kimberly Zarecor (2012), Felix Ringel (2014) and Michał Murawski (2019) have demonstrated. Their studies highlight how built socialism was and continues to be lived, offering resilience against capitalist encroachments while preserving original social and spatial functionalities. Similar findings are echoed in studies of the modernist planning legacies in small towns located in the UK, the Netherlands, Vietnam, and elsewhere, highlighting how the historical built environment continues to play an impor-

tant role in the urban social fabric amidst dramatic changes in socio-political landscapes (Beech, 2014; Ortolano, 2019; Schwenkel, 2020; Chevalier and Tzaninis, 2022).

Studies on the legacy of modernist urban planning in the Indian context also add significant contributions to our understanding. Nehruvian projects, for example, face criticism for being political status symbols that glorify industrial gigantism over local realities. Srirupa Roy (2007: 150) critiques the abstract vision of Indian steel towns, while Ashis Nandy (2003) notes that planners' fascination with modernity led to an erasure of cultural differences and the production of infrastructures misaligned with India's social conditions. However, grounded, bottom-up perspectives unveil the social rationales behind these cities' designs. Jonathan Parry's anthropological study on the steel town Bhilai suggests the township serves as both a social and economic project (Parry 2020: 7); he emphasizes its cosmopolitan core and role in blurring distinctions between officers and workers (ibid.: 76–103). Anthropologist Christian Strümpell's (2023) research on Rourkela, another steel town, provides valuable insights into everyday urban life and its social differentiation between the public company's regular employees, who enjoy job security, and other workers in the area. Revealing the historically contingent relationships between urban living, ethnicity, and caste in Rourkela, Strümpell emphasizes the socially contested nature of the city's space. He also highlights the transformation of former farmers into modern workers, significantly shaping Rourkela's social landscape (2013). Adding to this, architect Ali Saad (forthcoming) views Rourkela as a city with diverse social modernization goals. Together, these studies underscore the distinct social rationales underpinning the urban planning of these Indian townships.

In conclusion, while mainstream literature frequently dismisses post-war modernist urbanism as socially inadequate, a growing body of empirical studies has examined the social character of the modernist built environment across diverse geographical and political contexts. The research presented here contributes to this scholarly endeavour by offering a case study of modernist urban planning in an Indian peripheral industrial city, further enriching our understanding of modernism's living legacies.

Urban futures of the past: The history of urban design and planning in Bokaro Steel City

Bokaro Steel City stands as a prime example of a planned industrial new town where architecture and urban planning were leveraged by the Indian government to initiate radical social transformations. Between 1947 and 1981, India established 118 new towns – one of the world’s largest new town programmes (Glover, 2012), alongside those of the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. This initiative formed part of a broader movement towards Indian decolonization and social modernization, aimed at creating a technologically advanced and modern nation with economic autarchy (Prashad, 2008: xvii–xviii; Shaw, 2009). Efforts extended beyond town construction and also included the development of public-sector research institutes and heavy industries (Glover, 2012; Pathak, 2019). Among the most iconic urban developments symbolizing these aspirations was Chandigarh, designed as a capital city. However, the majority of new towns, like Bokaro, were industrial settlements (Glover, 2012). Strategically located in remote regions, these planned industrial towns sought to integrate peripheral areas into the Indian state, promoting modernization through urbanization and industrialization (Shaw, 2009; Glover, 2012). They aimed to transform ‘tribal’ populations into a modern urban workforce for the newly independent state (Strümpell, 2013).

Bokaro Steel City, in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand (before 2000, the southern portion of Bihar), was part of this social modernization agenda. Bokaro and similar planned steel towns of that period were each established adjacent to large steel facilities built with support from foreign countries – the Durgapur, Rourkela, and Bhilai plants by the UK, West Germany, and the Soviet Union, respectively. The Bokaro Steel Plant was also constructed with Soviet aid, often leading to misconceptions that Bokaro’s urban design closely followed Soviet town-planning practices (Strange, 2019: 319–37). However, as shown elsewhere (Redkina, 2025), Bokaro’s design was distinct from both Soviet and Western planned cities, particularly in its approach to social inequality. While influenced by the international modernist new town movement’s principles, Bokaro’s planning also reflected local contextual factors – most notably, India’s distinct political economy and Bokaro’s role within the country’s postcolonial nation-building agenda. Rather than seeking to eliminate class differences – as Soviet urban design aimed to do (Cera and Sechi, 2020) – Bokaro’s design aimed to mix up classes within the new urban fabric.

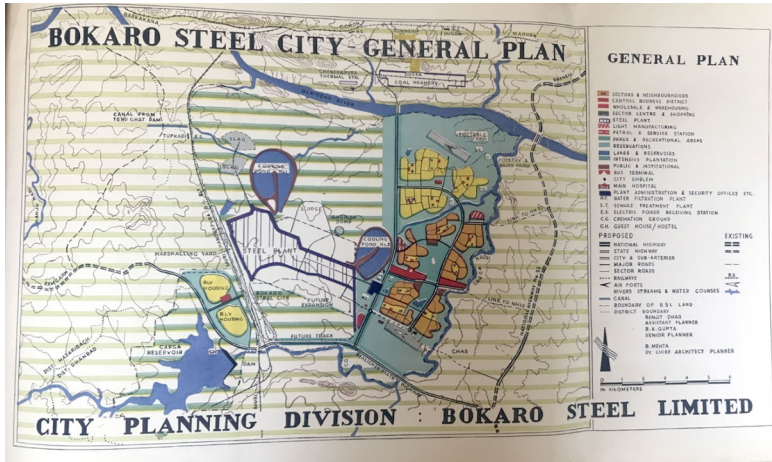
Bokaro's urban design incorporated modern planning principles aiming to provide the working class with a solid material foundation for a decent life. Initiated in the 1960s, the Bokaro Steel City Architecture and City Planning Department identified key concepts and spatial hierarchies to achieve this vision (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 10). A central idea was the 'Primary and Secondary School District Concept', which organized the city as a whole through a hierarchy of self-contained neighbourhoods and sectors. At the neighbourhood level, 100 to 150 dwelling units were grouped around a primary school, green space, and local shops, creating a 'village-like' setting designed to foster community and facilitate a smooth transition for people moving from rural areas (Glover, 2012: 124). Several neighbourhoods formed a sector, and multiple sectors made up the city.

This three-tier system structured community life around educational and social infrastructure, while a well-defined transport network connected the different levels. As alluded in the name of the concept, schools were central, with each neighbourhood featuring a primary school and each sector containing two secondary schools, alongside parks, local shops, nursery schools, and tot lots. In addition, each sector included other essential facilities such as health centres, post offices, religious and cultural institutions, police stations, and sports playgrounds (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 19). Large facilities, such as Bokaro General Hospital or City Park, were strategically administered at the city level. This nested hierarchy of social facilities demonstrated a socially oriented model of urban development, aiming to foster a sense of community through the provision of well-equipped shared public spaces. Intensive construction based on the General Plan took place in the 1970s, with further developments continuing in the 1980s. The city's construction largely adhered to the original plan; the implementation of smaller modifications over the years was outlined in appendices.

Bokaro's design, as seen in the General Plan (Figure 1), aimed to integrate workers from different income levels within shared residential spaces. Housing for different income groups was intermixed within each sector (Redkina, 2025). This incorporation of mixed-income housing within a single sector was a crucial aspect of the housing scheme, intended to encourage families from various income backgrounds to interact and share public spaces, shops, parks, and community centres (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 21–24). Notably, in an effort to set up a model town with a standard of accommodation surpassing the national average, each housing unit was equipped with electricity, running water, indoor toilets, and kitchens (ibid.: 37–43), providing a superior quality of

housing by Indian working-class standards at the time (Parry, 2020: 92). Unlike simply constructing a plant and hiring local villagers, the Indian government thus aimed to make Bokaro as a model of an alternative way of living.

Figure 1: The general plan of Bokaro Steel City, highlighting the relational location of various facilities within the city, and the city's proximity to industrial facilities.



Source: Bokaro Steel Limited, General Plan, ca. 1969–70. Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

Bokaro's historical design stands out in the landscape of Indian urbanism for its extensive level of state involvement and reliance on public-sector initiatives, reflecting the city's social role as part of social modernization effort in the early postcolonial country. Bokaro was designed as more than a provider of an industrial workforce; it was envisaged as a model city for a modern urban working class, in line with Nehruvian ideals of social equity and economic development (for additional maps and images, see Redkina, 2025). This commitment necessitated a complex relationship between the state, the public company, and urban governance. Land was compulsorily acquired from local peasants by the central government, then transferred to the state of Bihar (now Jharkhand) and subsequently subleased to SAIL, which continues to manage the land to this day. SAIL was responsible for overseeing the city's construction and governance, as well as managing social infrastructure such as schools, nurseries, and a hospital, alongside the industrial plant (Steel Authority of In-

dia Limited, 2012). In carrying out these tasks, SAIL primarily implemented the government's social and urban objectives, thereby maintaining the state's overarching authority.

In sum, Bokaro aligns in many ways with the broader global new town movement by embracing master-planned urban development, rational spatial organization, and a focus on collective social infrastructure – principles rooted in modernist planning across Europe and beyond. However, Bokaro is also marked by distinctly Indian and postcolonial features: a mixed economy combining state and public enterprise with private initiatives; the specific imperative of constructing a new national identity in the aftermath of colonialism; and distinct ways of mixing classes (for more details see Redkina, 2025). Ultimately, Bokaro stands as a unique experiment, synthesizing international models of planned development with India's particular socio-political context and state-driven aspirations.

The historical design of Bokaro's public spaces

To trace the historical design and development of Bokaro's public spaces, this research has drawn on a range of sources: the city's General Plan, dated from ca. 1969–70; an interview with Dipankar Das (an architect from the Architecture and City Planning Department who has resided in Bokaro since 1980); interviews with senior city library staff; and conversations with long-time residents. Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced account of how public spaces in Bokaro were envisioned, produced, and experienced in its initial decades, before the major socio-economic changes of the 1990s.

As evident in the maps of the General Plan, public spaces were central to Bokaro's design, as they were supposed to foster a sense of well-being and belonging in this new and remote town. Community facilities – educational, medical, retail, and recreational – were discussed in as much detail as housing and utilities such as electricity lines or sewerage (Bokaro Steel Limited, n.d.: 29–32). This emphasis on public spaces was intrinsically linked to the aspiration of cultivating a vibrant community life within the city – a goal that K. M. George, SAIL's managing director of that time, identified as fundamental to Bokaro's development: 'For harmonious working conditions, an integrated steel plant requires an integrated community life for its employees. To achieve this, a new town with all the facilities has been designed for the employees of Bokaro Steel Limited so that they have not only job satisfaction

but also full life satisfaction' (ibid.: 8). Additionally, this approach reveals that residents were regarded not simply as consumers or passive recipients of services, but as an essential workforce whose needs for relaxation and fulfilment were integral to the city's planning – needs to which the city was both obliged and committed to address.

Leisure and cultural spaces, central to the discussion in this chapter, are addressed in the General Plan through concepts of 'recreation' and 'shopping' and were integrated into the three-tier system of neighbourhood, sector, and city levels (ibid.: 18–19, 22–23). Neighbourhoods included children's playgrounds, toddler areas, and feeder parks that served as green buffers within residential blocks. Sectors contained local shops for convenient access to basic groceries, and most importantly, community halls. The latter, a vital part of the urban model, were eventually built in six out of ten residential sectors. Designed to align with the Nehruvian model of secular India, the community halls were non-religious and meant to foster interaction among diverse groups. They offered indoor game rooms, libraries, and areas for activities such as workshops or teenage gatherings, as well as outdoor sports areas with programmes for the well-being of both teenagers and adults (ibid.: 32). As residents shared with me, they could organize workshops or schedule meet-ups in the halls. Considering that an income-mixing housing scheme was also integrated on the sector level, these halls were important in bringing together people from different economic backgrounds through shared social activities. Additionally, each hall featured a library corner, offering a quiet study space or opportunities for study, rest, and learning. One interviewee, now a researcher in New Delhi, recalled how a community hall library enabled him to access books from different countries, which was of great interest to him as a child. Older residents I talked to remembered these library corners as peaceful retreats away from home.

There were also larger recreational facilities, generally situated closer to the city centre, as there was typically one large facility of each type available for the whole city. Expansive green spaces formed a defining feature of Bokaro's urban landscape from its earliest stages of development, reflecting a wider trend in modernist city planning. Since Bokaro was to be developed in several stages, the General Plan, dated ca. 1969–70, provided details for land use for the first stage only: 505 hectares out of 1255 were allocated for public green areas, such as city parks, feeder parks, and other open spaces, representing 40.2% of the area (ibid.: 20). This early focus on green zones was also reflected in a 1997 pre-

sentation by the Architecture and City Department of Bokaro¹ delivered by Dipankar Das, who served as an architect and town planner at the department from 1980 to 2013.

Figure 2: An arched bridge to the island in City Park, Bokaro Steel City, November 2023.



Source: Author.

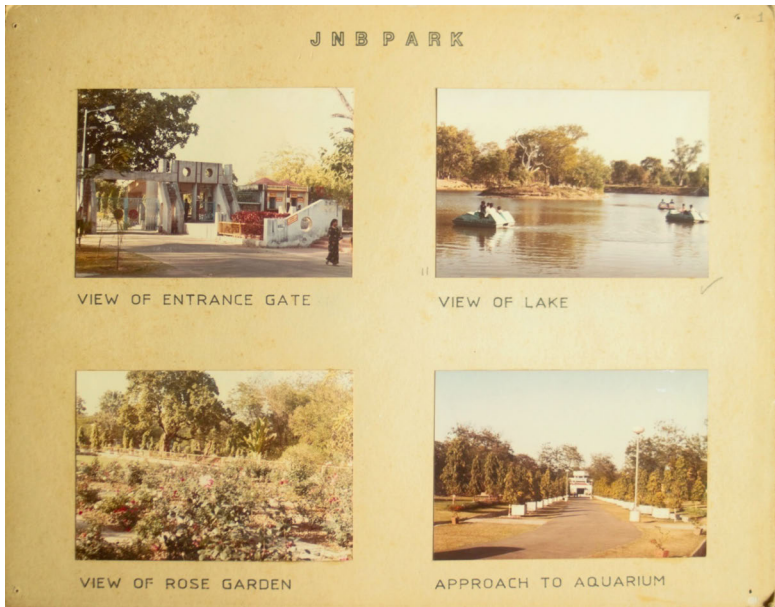
The presentation included a slide about the city's forests, underscoring their continued importance. I accessed a collection of old films and photographs capturing the beauty of City Park, established in the 1970s as a central recreational hub. Designed with gardens, lakes, and islands connected by arched bridges, the park featured rose gardens, palm trees, and pavilions providing shaded spots for relaxation. A large stage hosted significant city events, making the park a focal point for community gatherings. The park

1 The presentation, held at the University of Ranchi, focused on the development of Bokaro as an industrial city, a unique phenomenon in the region. The largest city near Bokaro, Ranchi became the capital of the newly formed state of Jharkhand in 2000.

also offered boating facilities on its large lake, as well as several restaurants, enhancing its social and recreational appeal. Based on photographs and residents' accounts from the 1980s and 1990s, the park was indeed impressive compared to parks in other Indian cities I have seen.

Another major green area, the Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park, completed in 1989, was the last public space designed and constructed by SAIL. Being one of the largest gardens in the state of Bihar (now Jharkhand), it showcased rare flora and fauna (Steel Authority of India Limited 2012: 48) accompanied by informative signage, earning its reputation as a zoo. Even today in the park, one can still see old information posts about the animals and plants found there. Thanks to its size, the park also offered a tranquil escape from urban noise. Additionally the zoo's attractions, according to the above-mentioned films, included rose gardens, a miniature train, and the Jal Jeev Vihar aquarium, which displayed posters of aquatic life.

Figure 3: The Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park (zoo), Bokaro Steel City. Presentation card (analogue photographs mounted on paperboard), 1997.



Source: Courtesy of Dipankar Das.

The city's extensive green venues were complemented by cultural venues. Bokaro's cultural infrastructure, which included community halls, was enhanced by the Central Library, near the city centre. Opened in 1974, this well-lit, multi-storeyed building with modern amenities symbolized the city's commitment to community and secular development. The library, though recently renovated, still retains its original layout, with separate study spaces and an old but vast collection of books in multiple languages. Several older residents recalled that it regularly hosted events for school students, such as book fairs or reading games. Addressing an image of the urban working class, these efforts aimed to lay the foundation for a more informed and affluent modern society. Additionally, three modern cinemas offered further entertainment options, enriching Bokaro's robust cultural landscape.

Figure 4: Central Library, Bokaro Steel City, November 2023.



Source: Author.

Bokaro's urban planning is generally oriented on merging classes, yet two clubs were notable for an early exclusionary nature: the Bokaro Club and the Russian Club. The Bokaro Club was discreetly located near the Bokaro Hotel – which primarily catered to high-ranking guests meeting the plant's and city's top executives. The club offered a conference room, concert hall, and rooftop

bar-restaurant, but these did not serve the general public. The Russian Club, located in a residential area for the Soviet technical specialists posted to Bokaro to build the steel plant, primarily functioned as a cultural centre for the Soviet delegation and Communist Party of India members. It only occasionally opened for public screenings and monthly events, where labourers and executives gathered with their families to watch films. Both clubs were largely inaccessible to the lower classes. This highlights a key aspect discussed earlier about Bokaro's urban planning: The city's design did indeed promote social mixing in many public spaces – where people from different backgrounds were brought together by the necessity of social activities – yet it also preserved exclusive venues for the upper classes, where such interaction was not required, thus preventing the total elimination of class differences.

Figure 5: Bokaro Club, Bokaro Steel City, March 2023.



Source: Author.

To conclude, in the 1970s and 1980s – still the early decades of post-Independence – when many Indian cities lacked entertainment infrastructures (Athique and Hill, 2010: 30), Bokaro stood out by offering abundant green spaces, cultural amenities, and leisure facilities. This approach aimed to at-

tract qualified professionals to the remote location (Pande and Kumar, 2021: 185) and ensure a high standard of living for public-sector workers – the majority of the planned town's population. Rather than establishing a classless society, Bokaro's urban design aimed to facilitate promoted coexistence and social engagement, reflecting the early post-Independence vision of fostering community and well-being in a city of national significance.

Evolving social functionality of modernist public spaces: Preserving the working-class fabric amid commodified logics

Beginning in the 1990s, Bokaro experienced a profound socio-economic transformation, shaped by broader geopolitical changes and nationwide shifts towards market liberalization. These changes departed from a state-led Nehruvian social contract and moved to neoliberal economic strategies (Patnaik, 2007; Patel, 2022). Indian cities were reimagined from places of use-value designed as decent places to live and into investment opportunities for private capital (Fernandes, 2004). As state provision and social security diminished, SAIL – according to its management – found itself without government support while continuously being burdened by high labour and social infrastructure costs (Pande and Kumar, 2021: xii, 35). In response, SAIL redefined its role from a national benefactor to a more profit-oriented entity (*ibid.*: 185), reducing its workforce significantly: from about 50,000 employees in the 1990s to 16,467 by 2015 (Strange, 2019: 336). SAIL also ceased its active role in Bokaro's urban development. Since 1989, after delivering the last major state-sponsored project, the Biological Park, SAIL has shifted to primarily being a landowner, inviting private investment in sectors like real estate, entertainment, and hospitality. Private investors have since established art centres, educational facilities, and upscale restaurants and cafés. These changes have profoundly impacted Bokaro's urban landscape, particularly in leisure and cultural activities, challenging Bokaro's original vision as a hub for social reproduction rooted in Nehruvian modernist ideals.

The two new major landmarks in Bokaro, the Bokaro Mall and the Hindu temple Jagannath Mandir – built in the last decade by Chinese and Indian investment respectively – exemplify this trend. The Bokaro Mall symbolizes middle-class consumerism and offers, for the most privileged, a controlled retreat from the city's hustle, whereas Jagannath Mandir indicates a move towards ethno-nationalization and privatized religious spaces. Unlike histor-

ical public spaces, these new spaces are more exclusive, defined by purchasing power and religious affiliation. Additionally, government mandates on corporate social responsibility (CSR) – requiring companies to support social, environmental, and economic development – have notably shifted responsibility for social well-being from the state to private entities. In Bokaro, CSR is exemplified by projects like the Bokaro Handicraft Training Centre – where rural women in economically challenging situations learn to craft and sell bamboo products, promoting small-scale entrepreneurship as a solution to economic challenges. These new spaces are markedly different not only in their sociality, but also their materiality. The well-lit, shiny, and meticulously maintained environments are purposefully designed to contrast with the functionalist and practical nature of the past. Overall, these new developments prioritize individual responsibility for social and economic life, selective social engagement, and leisure through consumption.

Today, Bokaro's historical public spaces exist within a shifting political and material context, shaped by an unforeseen restructuring. While modernist urbanism and its built environment are often criticized for their top-down approach and supposed social inadequacy, little attention has been paid to the evolving role of these spaces under current market conditions. This research argues against simply dismissing these historical spaces and the broader Nehruvian agenda that produced them. It draws on Lefebvre's understanding of social space – which emphasizes the interplay of 'conceived' (planning concepts and ideologies), 'perceived' (built forms), and 'lived' (everyday practices) dimensions (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 38–39) and contends that *'no space disappears in the course of growth and development'* (ibid.: 86) but instead accumulates historical layers that shape present dynamics (ibid.: 164–65, 299). Lefebvre therefore suggests that social spaces are shaped by these layers, as well as by property relations and land control (ibid.: 81–85). This perspective is especially valuable in Bokaro, where the relationship between the built environment, state ownership, and the public company creates a complex interplay between historical legacy and contemporary urban dynamics.

In Bokaro, the persistence of state ownership and of the social functionality of parks, libraries, cinemas, and the zoo – still owned by SAIL – underscore the endurance and resilience of the city's modernist ideals. Today Bokaro's built environment shaped by these Nehruvian modernist ideals remains largely intact. Unlike many other industrial towns where public spaces have been commercialized or converted into heritage sites, Bokaro's historical amenities have largely retained their original roles, with only minimal material changes, such

as signs of neglect or renovation. Thus, the city's public spaces exhibit remarkable consistency in their public ownership and social function despite market-driven pressures since the 1990s. What has changed is the broader urban landscape in which these spaces now operate, and the social role they now play, redefined in response to contemporary economic and social realities.

Bokaro's cultural landscape has shifted with the rise of multiplex cinemas and digitalization, which challenge the roles of older cinemas and libraries. Multiplexes now offer luxurious movie experiences with plush seating and fresh popcorn, making them exclusive due to pricing. This shift has impacted the traditional cinema scene: One of the three old cinemas has closed, while two – Jitendra and Pali Plaza – remain, today primarily serving low-income audiences who cannot afford the multiplex experience. Being located in the city centre and offering the same movies but at lower prices, these cinemas ensure that cultural participation remains affordable; this could be interpreted as *resistance to the commodification of leisure*, upholding cinema as a public good for a broader number of workers, rather than a luxury, and serving as class-balancing space.

The Central Library has also transformed, moving from a bustling community hub to a quieter study space. It now focuses more on subscriptions to regional and national journals than on expanding its book collection, resulting in an outdated and disorganized catalogue. Competing against new private libraries offering modern amenities like wi-fi and air conditioning but for higher fees (400 rupees per month), the Central Library remains financially affordable at a nominal cost (60 rupees per year). The library continues to privilege SAIL employees, providing them with membership immediately, whereas other people must acquire a sort of recommendation letter from a SAIL worker. Therefore, the library leans to historical social hierarchies rather than adapting to market-driven hierarchies. This reflects both the persistence of collectivist spatial legacies and the broader challenges facing public infrastructure under market pressures.

Significant changes have occurred at the neighbourhood and sector levels, as these areas have not consistently received financial support from SAIL. Many green spaces and playgrounds have been neglected and are now overgrown with greenery. Community halls, once central to the social mediation between classes, have nearly disappeared in favour of private venues. In the mid-1990s, the community halls became popular for private weddings and events due to their ample indoor and outdoor spaces. However, new private wedding venues catering to more glamorous tastes soon overshadowed them.

As SAIL scaled back support, funding for community hall activities dwindled, resulting in their decay and the closure of all six community halls by the late 2010s. Currently, the community centre in Sector III is undergoing a revival, with new facilities such as a tennis court, football field, and numerous indoor rooms, including a stage. This reflects a potential renewal phase for community spaces in Bokaro, but the actual results are yet to be seen.

Figure 6: The Jal Jeev Vihar aquarium, reopened in 2023 after renovation, in the Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park, Bokaro Steel City, December 2023.



Source: Author.

The Jawaharlal Nehru Biological Park (JNB) is the standout success among Bokaro's historical public spaces. It is exceptionally well-maintained, with manicured lawns, gardens, and an improved children's area. Recent renovations, like the reopening of the Jal Jeev Vihar aquarium, have enhanced its appeal. JNB hosts events such as Wildlife Week, Environment Day, and Animal Welfare Days, attracting families despite a declining animal population. Its

remote and expansive location offers a peaceful escape from urban noise. According to the 2016–2017 park report, JNB is financially sustainable, with support from entrance fees and revenue from photo and film shoots, reflecting a focus on profitability that enables continued renovations. Unlike the Town Administration–managed City Park, which shows signs of neglect, JNB operates under SAIL, with dedicated oversight.

City Park, an important green area in Bokaro, today continues to serve as a vast, open-access green space with free entry; it has not been upgraded, has aging infrastructure and overgrown gardens, and is only slightly maintained. Yet the park retains its role as a central locale with picturesque lakes that draw visitors for walks and picnics, especially during winter. Some previously accessible areas, like the islands and rose gardens, are now gated, restricting access and leaving visitors to view them from behind fences.

Figure 7: A closed gate to a bridge and an island in City Park, Bokaro Steel City, November 2023.



Source: Author.

Nevertheless, no major privatization or commercialization has taken place in City Park: There are no upscale cafes or restaurants marketed to higher-income groups, and visitors – as my interlocutors describe – continue to use the space as in earlier years, gathering for casual recreation and leisure. In this sense, City Park's persistence as a freely accessible space demonstrates a form of resistance to the enclosure and monetization of urban public spaces; residents' right to leisure and nature survives, however tenuously, against the logics of profit and pressures of contemporary urban transformations.

In summary, by the selective maintenance and upgrading of existing public facilities – neither commercializing them nor, since 1989, building new public facilities – SAIL acts primarily as a landowner and steward of the older social arrangements rather than as a developer. SAIL's commitment to public ownership and basic facility maintenance has been critical in preserving the original design and functionality of these spaces. Continuity of public ownership has kept the focus on visitors as residents, not dividing them based on their financial means. Leveraging Lefebvrian dialectics, as interpreted by Ahuja (2009: 30), these urban spaces embody historical social arrangements and actively reproduce the social dynamics initially embedded during their production – such as collective use, state stewardship, and public accessibility. These continue to be reflected in the way these spaces are conceived and perceived today.

Past visions, present realities: Conclusion

As the editors of this volume observe, contingency is based on the notion that nothing remains permanently fixed or unchangeable. It represents not only a condition of uncertainty but also an openness to unpredictable and plural futures. Even seemingly solid material structures, such as those from the last century constructed from concrete and an ambitious social vision, remain subject to reinterpretation and adaptation as urban realities evolve. This is evident in Bokaro's parks, libraries, and other historical public spaces, which were initially designed to foster an integrated and exemplary working-class community for a postcolonial nation. The role of bringing together people from different backgrounds has largely diminished. Over time, their social role has shifted: Today, these spaces provide vital infrastructure for residents who are excluded from the city's proliferating commercialized entertainment venues. Unlike the newly appeared privatized venues, where social interaction is commodified, Bokaro's historical public spaces have retained their collective and

inclusive character. Conceived as state-driven models for a postcolonial, inclusive future – embodying the ideal of leisure as a public good – these spaces now provide rare opportunities for accessible recreation. This stands in sharp contrast to the exclusive experiences offered by Bokaro's privately developed leisure venues.

This research has demonstrated that the social roles played by Bokaro's historical modernist public spaces are fundamentally contingent, shaped by the evolution of both the built environment and urban narratives. These empirical findings can be fruitfully interpreted through Henri Lefebvre's concept of social space. As Lefebvre argues, space is not a natural or neutral backdrop (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 26, 30, 36); rather, it is actively produced through social relations and arrangements (*ibid.*: 36, 412). His dialectical understanding of social space suggests that no social space ever fully disappears, but each, instead, retains enduring forms and functions even as it is reshaped by new social forces (*ibid.*: 164–5, 229, 403, 412). Drawing on this perspective allows for a critical analysis revealing how spatial arrangements persist and evolve over time, shaping both contemporary and future urban landscapes. Therefore, the modernist forms and functions built under Nehruvian ideals, produced through particular social relations, endure through the 'conceived' and 'perceived' elements of the built environment.

However, within the changed urban landscape, this endurance appears to inform the contemporary social landscape in an unexpected way: serving for those excluded by the new urban order. Far from fading into irrelevance, Bokaro's public spaces function as dynamic social agents in the present, while remaining products and co-producers of evolving social relationships (*ibid.*: 38–39). Grounded in a socio-historical understanding of urban spaces as deeply embedded with historical layers, property relations, and land control (*ibid.*: 81–85), this chapter argues that Bokaro's historical public venues continue to play a prominent role in the city's social urban landscape. Central factors contributing to the social endurance of Bokaro's historical public spaces, as this study suggests, are the continuity of their public ownership and their persistent social functionality. Yet, as political and material contexts have changed, so too has the social role of these spaces.

This contingency underscores that the persistence of the modernist built environment allows these spaces to remain relevant in an increasingly polarized urban landscape. The evolving contributions of older modernist structures challenge narratives that dismiss modernist planning as inherently inflexible or inadequate, as suggested by Scott (1998) and Sennett (2010) – and

reiterated by Roy (2007) and Nandy (2003) in the context of Indian planned towns. Instead, as this ethnographically grounded study has demonstrated, Bokaro's historical public spaces function not as static relics but as active components of urban life, maintaining their commitment to collective use and social integration.

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