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Samaj belonging in the in-between : reviving the greater Transvaal Gujarati Hindu community in Johannesburg

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2016

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24070

Daya, Jasmeeta Magan, 2016. Samaj :belonging in the in-between, reviving the greater Transvaal Gujarati Hindu community in Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, https://hdl.handle.net/10539/24070

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Abstract

Entitled “Samaj, Belonging in the In-between: Reviving the greater Transvaal Gujarati Hindu community in Johannesburg”, this project centres on themes of belonging, culture and identity, and seeks to explore how Diasporic or migrant communities foster a sense of belonging for themselves in their host society through the formation of community organisations and community centres for the enactment of their identity narratives.

The project centres on the Gujarati Hindu community, a minority Diasporic group, whose “histories and narratives[...] in the context of ethnicity, Diaspora and identity have yet to be fully explored in South African historiography” (Hiralal 2014: 62). The project seeks to explore how the historical narrative of the community, largely impacted by the marginalisation resulting from colonial and apartheid policies, influenced the group to strengthen their hold on their cultural identity through the formation of community organisations , or Samaj’s, and the establishment of community centres, in order to foster a sense of belonging for themselves, in the suburban areas, or ethnic enclaves, in which they were located.

At present, in post-apartheid South Africa, with the rise of urbanisation, members of these communities have sought to relocate to the city, away from those ethnic enclaves, which has resulted in a physical disconnect between them and the community spaces and, thus, their markers of cultural identity.

In relation to this shift, the question that arises is: how is a sense of belonging constructed, through the medium of architecture, in contemporary society, specifically in the urban environment where different cultures and identities intersect? In addition, can a regional centre be constructed in the city to serve as a base for the community? Furthermore, how could a community centre of this nature be re-envisioned in a post-apartheid, urban South African context?

As a means of addressing the questions above the project adopts acculturation theory and the integration of cultures as a favourable model to facilitate a sense of belonging. As a strategy for achieving that integration, the project argues for hybridity or the in-between (Bhabha 1994) as a location in which belonging can be constructed.

The concept of the in-between, where belonging, culture and identity can be interpreted, negotiated, re-constructed serves as the central concept in the project. This concept is applied at multiple scales and instances, including to site, programme and concept, where each instances aims at facilitating connection, experience, engagement and exchange - qualities inherent of the in-between . The resultant design is a cultural centre and culinary incubator located in the diverse, vibrant and multicultural suburb of Fordsburg.