

Essays I

Mangalore: Building castles in the air

by Ian M. Cook



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Mangalore: Building castles in the air

Ian M. Cook

Mangalore, a smaller city on the south-west coast of India, is awash with high-rise buildings in various states of construction. I spent eighteen months¹ in the city researching the ways in which urbanisation temporally and spatially re-structures and de-structures everyday life, working with auto drivers, moving vendors and housing brokers.

The city lies in coastal Karnataka, on a narrow stretch of land hemmed in by the Arabian Sea on one side and the Western Ghats on the other. Its expansion northwards – spurred on by the creation of an all-weather port and related industrial activity, and southwards – driven by a slew of new higher education institutes, has given the metropolitan region a population of 619,664, making it the 83rd largest urban area in India.

Property relations in the city are changing: people are now investing in housing, rather than building a home; the local politicians are growing ever more indistinguishable from the local real estate developers; and land-owners are cashing in on the opportunity for joint-builds with these same developers. Mangalore is on the property map.

Whilst most developers are local (although some firms with a national presence are now entering the local market), the labourers who build the buildings come from the northern part of the state, northern states of the country or even (it is whispered) Bangladesh. Living and working on the sites, the construction work involves men and women, and is for the most part unmechanised.

In this set of photos, however, I am interested in a different type of labour – the production of the imagined futures of the city. Billboards have a unique place in this process. These seemingly static representations of the future come alive when placed in relation to the urban presence that envelopes them. They are imaginations of a certain future in which Mangalore's present smallness is revealed through building developers' dreams of bigness. They are visions of castles in the air.

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Billboards offer a glimpse into an imagined future.



Smaller cities in the post-colonial Global South are materially and discursively positioned as secondary sites of urbanity. Imbued with both lack and hope, smaller cities are heavy with their potential futures.



Imagination is not just a product of the mind, but rather intimately tied to perception of, and acting in and upon the world around us; the perceived is engendered through imagination (Ingold 2012).



Material products of an active imagination, the billboards help construct the cityscape.



These imaginative acts are purposeful. They are ‘social value projects’ – “social actors’ reflexive attempts to inter-subjectively construct value with the aim of achieving particular goals” (Nakassis and Searle 2013:171).



They are drawn from class-infused ideas that produce new city-spaces. They are attempts to create an “enclave gaze”, a way of viewing the world from a perspective that is insulated from the city around it, and draws on a desire to make world-class spaces in the city that are both spectacular and safe (Brosius 2010: 42).



However, whilst private spaces in 'gated communities' might suggest independence, they do not sit in isolation. Exclusive private spaces are produced relationally vis-à-vis the public spaces that surround them (Bodnar and Molnár 2009).



Many of the "castles" remain empty; they are but investments in the future, sponges for 'black money' or a migrant's link to the homeland they left behind.

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