Position Statement

In the last decade and a half urban studies has radically reconstituted its object of investigation. Recognizing that infrastructural patchworks, short-lived structures, momentary exchanges and sensations hold the key to understanding political agency, urbanists have departed from prioritizing built form’s permanent inscription to focus on the impermanent traces of material culture. The ephemeral and the contingent have taken central stage in an effort to explain the relation between the built environment, transient forms of urban popular culture, and the embodied practices by which we make sense of city space. Yet, few have considered the cumulative impact of a large number of “temporary” interventions operating within the “permanent” infrastructure of the city. This lacuna resides in a methodological problem: we do not have a template of how to describe, “map” as it were, the everyday and the contingent aspects of urban experience that involve multiple temporalities beyond the usual longer arc of urban studies. One of my current projects, Mapping Ephemerality, brings together GIS mapping tools, architectural analysis, ethnography, and urban history, to explain and visualize the relation between the ephemeral/temporary and the perennial/permanent aspects of city-making through a focused reading of an emergent set of spatial relations initiated by the annual religious festival of Durgapuja in Kolkata. I am interested in not simply those aspects of urban form and infrastructure that are amenable to mapping, but also those aspects of urban experience that resist mapping.