Introduction

AN ASYNCHRONOUS TIME LINE

CONSTRUCTION’S URBANISM
(GURGAON, DECEMBER 2011)

It is a cold December evening in Gurgaon, a city within India’s National Capital Region (NCR), and I stand on an elevated Delhi Metro platform. My train into Delhi is still five minutes away, and I watch the sun set over the growing urban region. The station, close to the southwestern border of India’s National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, is busy with commuters heading home. Gurgaon, a city-suburb soon to be renamed Gurugram, stretches before me in the gentle light of dusk. From my vantage, I see the city as it dissolves into the gray-blue shadows of the night. This is the first of fifteen months that I will spend in NCR—a region that comprises multiple cities and states that surround the NCT—doing research on the construction industry and the urban development it has brought about. I plan to interview developers, laborers, architects, and allied groups across the production chain of the construction industry and just met a friend from my days as an architecture undergraduate to talk about urban development.

The setting sun illuminates construction work in the area; light speckles across brand-new highways and glints in the delicate lattices of electric
poles. The long rays of a December sun extend across empty tracts of land that await construction and diffuse through the incomplete windows of concrete apartment blocks. Sunlight percolates a landscape of circling tower cranes and half-finished building frames. Clouds of cement and sand hang over the city and turn the air opaque and asthmatic. The sun hovers behind the hazy towers, a glowing, orange ball tamed by the construction dust in the sky.

The city space below the station platform I stand on overflows with the armatures of construction work. Mazdoors (laborers) return home from construction sites, their fântis (planing tools) and ploughs slung over their shoulders, their saws, hammers, and dors (plumb lines) held in plastic bags. Pedestrians hop, agile and limber, over the ups and downs of curving cement roads and dug-up pipes; they navigate around new trenches and climb over the mud mountains that cover the old. Scaffolding rises from the pavement. Dump trucks full of cement or gravel ply the streets,

Figure 1. Sunset over buildings under construction, Gurgaon, 2012. Photo by author.
interspersed with large flatbed trucks with steel bars that threaten to run through the windshields of the cars that follow. An occasional cement mixer stands patiently among clogged traffic, its concrete drum ceaselessly swirling to protect its semiformed cargo.

The rumbling belly of the cement mixer is iconic of the euphoric energy and atmospheres that construction generates: the dynamic sounds, smells, and all-encompassing sensory quality of construction. The liquid concrete that will solidify into architecture’s permanence reflects the industry’s mobile and fluid material-scapes, and the rotating drum evokes the very cyclicity of construction’s operations. The cement mixer’s state of turmoil, its relentless churning, seeps into the sensibilities of all those in construction. It highlights the puzzle that seemingly permanent, concrete architectures and infrastructure are sustained through the nonendurance of people, machines, and materials.¹

If construction is read as a heightened transient atmosphere, then what implications does this transience have for the permanence it gives rise to? In the pages that follow, I explore the fundamental dilemma at the heart of

Figure 2. A cement mixer in Gurgaon, 2012. Photo by author.
India’s urban development politics: the relationship between the ephemeral and the durable. This book studies ephemeral atmospheres—understood as atmospheres generated by the temporary presence, transformation, and circulation of people, materials, and objects in construction—to question habitual ways of depicting Indian urbanism in architecture and anthropology. I examine the political work aesthetically heightened atmospheres of construction do. In doing so, I argue that ephemeral atmospheres in construction act as a political economic tool through the enabling and disabling of specific kin, social, and material relations, a configuration I term the *industrial ephemeral*. Ephemeral atmospheres are fleeting and temporary, but they produce durable socialities and materialities that support both industrial accumulation and political mobilization.

Construction and urban development, then, despite the commonsense assumption that they deal in permanence, are actually characterized by the ephemeral, in many forms: movement of people, materials, and machines; material states; sounds; and emotions. The ephemeral manifests in the transforming material and aesthetic states of architecture under construction, which allow the rapid reshaping of social and political relations. It
also names the disappearance of state support that gives rise to conditions of economic precarity. The active circulation of drawings and documents across the region and the sounds, smell, and textures of changing architecture, as well as the affects and emotions that accompany them, can likewise be viewed as instances of the ephemeral. The deliberate mobility and displacement of people in construction is an ephemeral that can be experienced not only as aspirational and enabling but also as violent and exclusionary. Together, these forms of the ephemeral consolidate and produce long-term relations; they generate the potential for exploitation and liberation through their active emergence and dissipation.

In *The Industrial Ephemeral* I capture this dynamism through ethnographic observations and interviews conducted at two construction sites: one a large-scale commercial real estate project I call Wandering Woods and the other a residential bungalow project I call Haveli. The former helped me analyze private, industry-led real estate and its production chains; at the latter, I was able to interact more closely with workers and foremen on site. Wandering Woods was representative of several large-scale residential and commercial real estate developments that dotted the fringes of Gurgaon in 2012. It was a developer-led operation and had over three hundred workers and about fifty supervising staff. Behind Wandering Woods was a large tract of land where workers were housed, known as the labor colony; it was gated and guarded. Haveli, on the other hand, was a smaller project, with thirty-odd workers, several of whom lived on site. It was an architect- and contractor-led bungalow development and is representative of the smaller-scale construction activity that takes place across the region. The pace of work was slower and less regimented than at Wandering Woods, allowing me more time with workers.

Construction is omnipresent in Gurgaon, a region that seems to have been under construction for over three decades. In the fifteen months following my arrival in December 2011, my research on the industry would take me beyond these two construction sites, into engineering and architectural firms, factories and material supply shops, and workshop spaces. People from the two sites would guide me to farms and temples, to village homes and law firms. I would spend time at developers’ offices and speak with journalists, investment bankers, planners, and politicians and visit buildings under construction in the region. This situated and circulatory
methodology revealed the profound scalar, social, and spatial effects of the construction industry as it interdigitates with the region. While these fifteen months, between 2012 and 2013, constituted my official ethno-graphic fieldwork in the construction industry, my research is informed by a longer involvement with construction. I am a daughter of a landscape architect, a friend of architects, a trained architect who then practiced and taught architecture, an anthropologist who studied construction, and an educator who teaches artists and designers. In this introduction, I provide an account of key aspects of the construction industry by way of five time periods in my life. Eschewing a linear trajectory, I revisit these moments of reflection in order to highlight the ephemeral durabilities that drive construction work. These periods allow us to dwell in the production of Indian urbanism; they also demonstrate how my understandings of architecture, infrastructure, and construction have accreted through a life path immersed in the industry.

TRANSIENT ATMOSPHERES (GURGAON, FEBRUARY 2013)

MD and I take a break on a sun-dappled afternoon in February. We sit together on a patch of lawn in one of the many gated communities that make up Gurgaon’s new wave of urban development. I am here conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the construction industry, and MD is a small-scale contractor and carpenter on the Haveli construction site. We have spent the morning on the grimy construction site opposite the lawn and are happy to relax on the cool green grass of the neighborhood park. We chat as we open our lunches of vegetables, rotis, and rice, aware of the steady bangs and clangs emanating from the site across from us. The bangs merge with the noise of the Delhi Metro under construction and the sounds of construction sites around us. India’s NCR is a colosseum of construction, and Gurgaon, a once-sleepy military and industrial town on the outskirts of New Delhi, feels like the epicenter.

On the peripheries of Gurgaon, tracts and tracts of former agricultural land are dotted with real estate in various stages of construction. Billboards shine brightly, promising fresh constructed paradises, palatial architectures, and verdant living. Sitting in the quiet colony park, MD and I observe Haveli
under construction. It is dominated by sounds, smells, and movement: clouds of dust, the screeches of machines, the repeated motions of workers and supervisors across the site, and the intermingled smells of cement and sawdust. We watch as the architecture transforms, knowing that each day brings something new. There will come a time when the foundation is covered by mud; later the steel bars of columns will be encased by cement, the walls will then be plastered and painted, and finally, all the workers will be gone. Construction as an industry encodes an ephemeral logic: not only does it depend on its workers’ ability to disappear from one site and move to another, but its constitutive processes—from site surveying to construction to project completion—are based on a set of continuous transformations that displace and erase previous atmospheres, materials, and work.

The effect is intense: this multisensory, ephemeral experience is typical of construction, where atmospheres of construction are understood as techno-aesthetic conditions: a mix of humans and nonhumans who produce changing and magnified sensoriums. These continuous atmospheric transformations produce a “lived affect” and form a “force field” that organizes and disciplines people, materials, and space within industrial operations. The sounds of machines, the movement of people, money, and drawings, the transforming architectures as staircases rise and walls fall produces an encompassing atmosphere that in my analysis is not a mere condition nor a diagnostic of technological and urban change, but is a “form of capital” and a form of politics both dominant and marginal. Interpreting these construction atmospheres, would require a common theory of the environment produced by bringing together theories of affect, atmospheres, new materialisms, and aesthetics. A focus on affect theory and new materialisms reveals the intimate workings of industrial political economy in construction. Emphasizing these within aesthetic theory and tying them to a theory of atmospheres allows us to understand the sociopolitical relations ephemeral atmospheres engender. I draw these together to argue that atmospheres are not epiphenomenal to the construction industry: they feed the accumulative dynamics of construction and the struggles against them. Ephemeral atmospheres are not universal; they are localized and differentiated, experienced and felt differently by those within them. It is this differential experience that leads to challenges to the industry’s political economic might.
MD is short for Mohammed, but he prefers to initialize himself. I call him “MD ji,” using a suffix for elders as a marker of respect and kinship. The nomenclature is strange given that we are likely of a similar age, but it is perhaps apt given MD’s years of construction experience. As a Bihari Muslim man from the governmental Other Backward Classes (OBC or marginalized caste) category, MD paved his way into contracting through labor: he started by making ice cream, before moving into tailoring and then cement work, finally learning carpentry fifteen years ago. As a dominant-caste and -class, Baniya-Brahmin, Maharashtrian-Gujarati woman, I studied architecture in one of India’s top public universities and worked in a firm with a global presence, only to return to sites as a PhD in training from Harvard University. The “ji” I use is juxtaposed against the “Madam” he uses; the two terms embed social hierarchies and a constructed but distanced kinship.

Everyone on site is a little afraid of MD, as he often curses people out. His boldness, however, makes him insightful and unafraid in his commentary on construction. Today we talk about human presence on construction sites and the circulation of people through urban architectures. “It is like this,” he says. “You do the drawing, I will do the work or get the work done, someone else will come stay here, and someone else will break it.” He traces the transitory states that construction requires, emphasizing the temporariness of both people and architecture. “The person who is breaking it will bring a machine, attach it to a generator, and dhun dhun dhun”—he mimics the speed and sound of a jackhammer—“will break it all.” I nod in response: I have seen the previous building on this site shatter under the claw of the excavator. MD goes on: “The owner of this house . . . he does not want the tree cut [down], as his father planted it.” MD talks about the homeowner’s ancestry and inheritance. He highlights the privilege of memorializing a tree: “When I die, will I tell my children, ‘do not touch my body’?” He contrasts the tree, the property, and home against his own body, pointing out that he has no material legacy to be remembered by: “I worked my whole life to feed them.” With characteristic directness, MD reiterates his own fleetingness, juxtaposing it against the permanence of the property he constructs. He highlights the central work of construction economies: to render people, environments, and even life ephemeral for material gain.

The idea that architecture, infrastructure, and construction are ephemeral is counterintuitive. We are taught to recognize construction as a
permanent process of spatial and social change, rather than to dwell on its temporality; we focus on architecture and infrastructure as an end and not on the means through which they are produced. Construction’s ability to turn humans and material landscapes into transient entities, however, is the source of the industry’s political-economic power. As the following chapters demonstrate, an ephemeral atmosphere produces heightened affective conditions of change that allow success for some and create precarity for others (chapter 1). The ephemeral materialities of money and drawings—their transformation, appearance, and disappearance—embed networks of knowledge and practices of power (chapters 2 and 3). Ephemeral construction sounds and atmospheres produce disciplinary environments that emphasize efficiency and rationality but often result in resistance and rebellion (chapters 4 and 5). Construction harnesses ephemeral emotions toward the making of real estate (chapter 6) and creates a system of economic and spatial precarity for migrant workers who must live in a state of continuous motion that denies them rights to the spaces they build. As MD puts it, “I finished the work, . . . even if I go to site, how will I go in? Is there any of our staff? All our staff has gone.” The ephemeral names the host of temporary workers and the transient, processual material and sensory phenomena that characterize construction, from labor to aesthetics to emotions. It is a bodily, sensory, and aesthetic approach to understanding urban development that presents urban knowledge as absorbed, attuned to, and immersed in rather than metanarrativized or quantified. The ephemeral as a temporary, nonpermanent state channels human transience, aesthetic transformations, and shifting material states into forms of subjugation but simultaneously holds the potential of agency and rebellion. To analyze the ephemeral is to analyze the heart of social and political struggle.

Four descriptions of the ephemeral—dictionary definitions of the term, official Hindi translations, academic studies of the ephemeral, and descriptions of the ephemeral by workers—provide insight into the spectrum of ephemeral occurrences in construction. In common parlance, the ephemeral is used to depict that which is fleeting, transient, or temporary, or that which appears and disappears, such as the temporary life of insects or anomalies in the atmosphere.12 Ephemera or quickly destroyed materials in art (posters, flyers) and architecture (street stalls, informal settlements, refugee camps, festivals) have been the other of art history
and architecture. Even in anthropology, where ephemera references ghosts, media worlds, or temporary sensory phenomena, the ephemeral is an understudied concept. The marginality of the ephemeral, however, can also be its strength. Ephemera can be “a mode of proofing and producing arguments” by minoritarian culture and criticism makers and produce subjectivity.

The ephemeral as a concept appears in India. The high-register Hindi of government documents codes the ephemeral as shanbhar (fleeting) or alpakaalik (short-term, temporary). The latter form is used to describe temporary work and transit camps; in this form, the ephemeral describes the state of being temporary within a space (as a migrant worker) or a temporary material state (as in a transit camp or informal settlement). Both of these senses characterize the experience of construction workers. The ephemeral manifests on construction sites in the language of erasure (gayab, disappear) or dissolution (miti mein mil jaana, lit. to dissolve into the dust) that workers use to critique the industry. In this form it highlights the fleetingness of workers displaced from the sites they build. In all four instances, the ephemeral is a transitory state of people, materials, and objects in construction and becomes a tool for political comment. It is important to note too that the ephemeral is not a natural feature but one that is deliberately constructed.

To be within a construction site is to inhabit a thriving space of work and life: alive with activity, half-formed and half-destroyed, occupied by myriad communities and classes, and overflowing with a multiplicity of work. It is to be immersed in construction atmospheres. Atmospheres saturate the senses and seep into all those who dwell within the space and are connected to the politics of labor. The immersive atmospheres of construction work, as with most industrial work, are environments generated through labor and its accompanying social relations. The shared experience and relations that atmospheres engender are tied to forms of laboring subjectivity, as the next section describes.

Construction’s Kin (New Delhi, May–June 2010)

The summer before the Commonwealth Games sees a hectic pace of construction. The cityscape mutates as roads are dug up and repaved, new overpasses constructed, and bus stops completed. The Delhi Metro is
under construction, and every day brings fresh heaps of gravel, stands of scaffolding, and machines. A Commonwealth Games Village grows on the banks of the river Yamuna, and laborers move in and out of the region, following work opportunities. I too travel in North and Northeast India, from Lucknow to Delhi and Gangtok to Indore, wanting to know more about India’s urban change as I conduct preliminary fieldwork for my dissertation. NCR is the seat of construction activity for the region, I am told, where all the large decisions for small towns are made; it is where the headquarters of the developers and contractors and even the state ministers who make decisions are located, so I come to the city to investigate.

It is an unforgiving Delhi summer, potent with the dry heat that saps energy and water with equal intensity. One cannot walk—much less labor—for long in this weather. Yet workers dig and weld, cement and stack all around me as I walk the streets. The sudden sound and smell of water provides temporary relief and a source of joy only the thirsty can feel. I hear children laughing: Bandana and Rinki, two young girls, play on the side of the street as their mother washes dishes and bathes next to a small pipe pumping up water. This family, like many of those working on small-scale road construction, lives on the pavement next to the trenches they dig, and their home is a blue tarp tent supported by bamboo sticks.

The home is meager and bare, but their mother Heera knows her life priorities. “You should have children too,” she advises me, perhaps knowing that the answer to my curiosity about her temporary home lies in an understanding of family; Bandana goes to a public school nearby, accessing a better education than the one available in the village. “Home is home, no matter how far you go,” she says; you can live in a temporary state, by the side of a road, if it ensures long-term success or survival for your family.

Heera and her children are not the only ones living on the streets. As I move around the city, I hear machines backing up, dodge cascades of gravel, and am startled by loud crashes of falling metal. Workers remake the area, often living where they work. Architecture and infrastructure are no longer static and material objects but in a continuous process of transformation, one state forever morphing into a new one. Such was the dynamism of this scale of urban construction that everything and everyone seemed to be on the move. Ramesh, a mason working on an apartment building, describes the process: “We build huts (jhuggis) wherever
we go. Wherever the work goes on, that is where we stay. Sometimes we are a hundred different men. We all come from different villages. We cook together and eat together. We break [down] our own homes and then move to the next worksite.”

A hundred different people brought together through construction, eating together, living together, and working together, experiencing both the construction work on site as well as continuous displacement as they complete work. The breaking and constitution of materials, the dissolutions and concretizations, the movements and mediations—these conditions generate ephemeral atmospheres that comprise heightened aesthetic and affective states; atmospheres stimulate increased intimacies and emotions that forge social bonds. The temporality of construction—its physical demands, its surreptitious workings, and its urgencies—requires social networks and constructs social relations. The ephemeral builds kinship relations.

Kinship has long been a site of study for anthropologists, and South Asian studies have examined the agencies, contestations, and frictions that kinship networks produce. Few authors, however, extend their consideration of kinship into business and agrarian development. Ephemeral atmospheres deploy and facilitate a politics of kinship in two ways. First, ephemeral atmospheres of construction are part of what Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd calls a “casteization of capital,” in that they replicate caste hierarchies and operate through caste-based affiliations and networks and are deployed to produce capital through the maintenance of caste hierarchies. This effect is seen, for example, in the way that real estate developers populate their administration with kin members to keep profits in familial and community hands. Second, the proximities and atmospheres of labor on construction sites can also contribute to the formation of new social relations, constructing a relatedness through the intimacies and shared solidarities of work environments. MD, for example, speaks fondly of many workers he has met on different sites and calls them and me on a regular basis to explore opportunities for work. The durability of kinship entangles with the ephemeral, as in both cases it is the ephemeral that feeds the strength of the durable. Ephemeral atmospheres facilitate the construction of social relations in order to accumulate capital; they provide cover for the construction and maintenance of hegemonic kin-based accumulation and