

# **Interrogating Conceptions of ‘Modernity’ and ‘Tradition’ in the Production of the Built Environment in South Asia.<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

It has been argued that concepts of modernity and tradition are historical categories that emerged in the context of imperial encounters with the ‘other’ during Colonization. This paper will show how the contingent nature of these categories becomes apparent when considering the production of the built environment in South Asia.

The advent of British Colonialism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century precipitated a significant change in the urban landscape of South Asian cities. It also created a binary conception of a modern order that was a break from the local or native order of space. From then on, modernity became the institution of a liberal western order and tradition was what was retained by the natives that had been eclipsed by the new order. This trope of the dysfunctional Pre-Modern entered into native, nationalist imaginings of the past as well by establishing a binary between what was and what came after as being forever opposed to each other. In order to assert one, the other had to be negated. The Imperialist narrative achieved this through asserting the inherently moral nature and legitimacy of the Colonial order while the Nationalist narrative strove to recover the ‘tradition’ that had been displaced by the Colonial order. The modern disciplines introduced with Colonial rule did provide a powerful prescriptive model of urban planning that created a privileged position for what has come to be seen as the modern form of the city. However, drawing upon contemporary South Asian urban historiography and research it is argued here that this order was constantly destabilized by native resistance, appropriation, hybridity and accommodation. In doing so, it appears that the production and reproduction of space in the built environment of South Asia constantly challenges notions of a dynamic, all-consuming modernity against a static tradition that needs to be preserved.

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