

‘The Spirit of the House is Still There’: Memory, Identity, and Resistance at 18/76A Dover Lane

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Abstract

Urban spaces in Kolkata, moulded by colonial history and modern urbanisation, face relentless pressures of commodification that endanger the cultural and personal memory of its residents and communities. Shuktara Lal’s urban ethnographic narrative “18/76A Dover Lane” in *People Called Kolkata*, curated by Kamalika Bose, exemplifies how such spaces can be preserved and repurposed to uphold cultural and historical significance. This study explores the transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct through the lens of Henri Lefebvre’s ‘lived space’, Edward Soja’s ‘Thirdspace’, Michel de Certeau’s ‘tactics’, and Gaston Bachelard’s ‘poetics of space’. I argue that the sisters’ adaptive reuse of their ancestral home exemplifies Lefebvre’s notion of space as an active social product, showing how the space is imbued with personal memories and cultural identity, thereby resisting the commodification typically associated with urban redevelopment. Though this process, the house becomes a ‘lived space’ that embodies personal narratives and social relations. The decision to transform a private residence into a cultural venue aligns with Soja’s concept of ‘Thirdspace’, a realm where public and private, historical and contemporary, intersect to produce a hybrid space. This convergence creates a space that goes beyond preserving memory; it integrates these memories into the larger urban fabric, forming a new, multifaceted environment that reflects both continuity and change. De Certeau’s concept of ‘tactics’ demonstrates how preserving the structure, repurposing with cultural meaning, retaining artefacts, and thoughtful restoration, subtly resist dominant urban commodification ‘strategies,’ ensuring cultural continuity. Bachelard’s ideas of the emotional resonance of buildings underscore the house’s transformation; it retained its psychological and imaginative essence despite public repurposing. This case demonstrates the potential of adaptive reuse as a strategy for sustainable urban development, inviting consideration of community-led cultural preservation in global urban planning.

Keywords: Urban space, Urban ethnography, Commodification, Adaptive reuse, Kolkata

“Dover Lane...is a perfect instance of how architecture builds communities.”¹

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¹ Sumana Mukherjee, ‘Living and Dying in Dover Lane’, *Mint*, 10 July (2015). At: <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/pTmPWXINhTRvD5Pu7bdxmJ/Living-and-dying-in-Dover-Lane.html>.

Introduction

Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) is geographically bifurcated into North and South Kolkata, each possessing a unique historical and cultural identity. North Kolkata, the city’s historic heart, stretches northward from the central districts towards Dum Dum, bordering the Hooghly River. This region includes neighbourhoods such as Shyambazar, Sovabazar, Bagbazar, Maniktala, and Chitpur. Renowned for its colonial-era architecture, North Kolkata preserves its narrow lanes, historic residences, and palpable old-world charm, reflecting its former status as the heart of British Calcutta.² It is considered the cultural and historical core of the city, where traditional Bengali life and heritage remain prominent. South Kolkata, on the other hand, generally begins south of Park Street and extends to areas such as Ballygunge, Alipore, Tollygunge, Jadavpur, and Garia. Propelled by the economic liberalisation policies of 1991, which aimed to integrate the Indian economy with global markets and stimulate economic growth, South Kolkata emerged as a symbol of the city’s contemporary transformation.³ Characterised by its spacious residential areas and modern amenities, South Kolkata presents a stark contrast to the densely populated, historically significant neighbourhoods of North Kolkata. South Kolkata, with its comparatively open spaces, attracted waves of migrants and fostered new developments, distinguishing itself from the densely populated, conservative, and traditional character of old city.⁴ This relative openness facilitated a landscape more conducive to modernisation and social change, shaping South Kolkata as a distinct cultural and demographic contrast in the city.⁵ While South Kolkata is less densely populated than the historic North, it has witnessed the growth of modern amenities, real estate projects, and retail centres, catering to a developing middle class.⁶ It symbolises Kolkata’s ongoing transformation, balancing heritage with urban modernisation demands.⁷

In the heart of Kolkata lies a street where the past and present intermingle, forming a narrative rich with history and emotional resonance: Dover Lane. Dover Lane in Ballygunge, South Kolkata, is renowned for its historical and cultural significance, particularly as a centre for classical Indian music. The area gained prominence with the initiation of the Dover Lane Music Conference in 1952, an event that has since become an iconic annual celebration of Indian classical music.⁸ Contemporarily, Dover Lane remains a vibrant residential and commercial area, blending

² Joanne Taylor, *The Forgotten Palaces of Calcutta* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2011).

³ Annapurna Shaw, ‘Inner-City and Outer-City Neighbourhoods in Kolkata’, *Environment and Urbanization ASIA*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2015), pp. 139–153.

⁴ Aditi Mukherjee, *In the Shadow of Displaceability: Refugees and Migrants in Suburban Calcutta*, Leiden University (PhD. dissertation, 2021), pp. 35–37.

⁵ Biswajit Mondal, Dipendra Nath Das, and Gour Dolui, ‘Modeling Spatial Variation of Explanatory Factors of Urban Expansion of Kolkata: A Geographically Weighted Regression Approach’, *Modeling Earth Systems and Environment*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2015).

⁶ Saurav Mitra, *A Study of Social Sustainability of High-Rise Living in Kolkata, India*, University of Adelaide (PhD. dissertation, 2023), pp. 121–124.

⁷ Mark J. Jackson, ‘“Live the Way the World Does”: Imagining the Modern in the Spatial Returns of Kolkata and Calcutta’, *Space and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2010), pp. 32–53.

⁸ Suhrid Sankar Chattopadhyay, ‘70 Years of Kolkata’s Dover Lane Music Conference’, *Frontline*, 29 December (2022). At: <https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/music/70-years-of-kolkatas-dover-lane-music-conference/article66285492.ece>.

its rich musical heritage with modern urban life. The area itself is a microcosm of Kolkata's ongoing evolution as a metropolis that cherishes its historical roots while adapting to contemporary urban dynamics. It is emblematic of a distinct form of urban life, embodying a “cosmo-ecological collective life” of Indian modernity as it reflects the evolving cultural and environmental sensibilities of its residents.⁹



Figure 1: Biswarup Ganguly, *Dover Lane - Kolkata*. 18 September 2011. Wikimedia Commons.

Thus it signifies how Dover Lane embodies an evolving blend of cultural and environmental awareness among its residents, mirroring their sophisticated and interconnected sensibilities within an urban setting. This lane is not just a residential area; it serves as a space for personal narratives that interweave with the narrative of Kolkata, providing insights into the social fabric and collective consciousness of the city. The area's architecture and street layout are deeply tied to Indian humanism, where “modest ‘village’ architecture” contrasts sharply with the colonial ‘bungalows’ and high-density ‘tenements’ in other parts of Kolkata.¹⁰ The “modest ‘village’

⁹ Dorian Wiszniewski, ‘Dover Lane – A Cosmo-Ecological Collective Life of Indian Modernity’, in *Architecture and Collective Life*, eds Penny Lewis, Lorens Eyan Holm, and Sandra Costa Santos (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 219.

¹⁰ Wiszniewski, ‘Dover Lane’, p. 225.

architecture” comprises individual family plots that emphasise a communal and collective lifestyle. These houses often feature patios, balconies, bay windows, and roof terraces aligned along tree-lined streets. Unlike the opulent mansions of the colonial “White Town” (areas primarily inhabited by the British and colonial elites),¹¹ or the economically varied tenements of “Black Town”¹² (where the local Indian population resided), in North Kolkata, this village-style architecture accommodates the well-educated middle-class: “*bhadralok*” (gentleman) and “*bhadramahila*” (lady). The houses are designed to foster traditional Bengali activities such as “*adda*” (informal and intellectual discussions), which animate the streets and are emblematic of an educated and progressive community life that bridges the traditional and the modern.¹³

Dover Lane is categorised as a liminal ‘third space,’ bridging past and present through a collective life attuned to environmental rhythms, similar to the ebb and flow of the seasons in the Sindhu region.¹⁴ This distinct collective consciousness aligns with Kolkata’s layered history, where traditional and modern identities are in constant negotiation, symbolising a “progressivism [that] is subtle and nuanced.”¹⁵ Dover Lane not only illustrates the aesthetic evolution of Kolkata but also serves as a microcosm of Indian modernity’s broader intellectual and ecological shifts, resonating with themes of collective identity, environmental continuity, and cultural resilience. The urban ethnographic narratives surrounding Dover Lane reveal a strong attachment to place, where personal memories intertwine with collective identity. For instance, residents often express a powerful nostalgia for their childhood neighbourhoods, contrasting these with new localities that may offer more material comfort yet lack the perceived warmth and communal life of Dover Lane.¹⁶ This attachment raises questions about the middle class’s inclination to remain “steadfast and perhaps ‘irrational’” in their preference for familiar, historically rich areas despite the allure of modern amenities elsewhere.¹⁷ Somdatta Chakraborty theorised the liminality of Dover Lane within the concept of “threshold-ness, or an in-betweenness,” where Kolkata’s middle class occupies a liminal space between historical continuity and neoliberal aspirations.¹⁸ This “twilight zone” is marked by the desire to uphold traditional values while engaging with the pressures of a rapidly modernising economy and society.¹⁹ Dover Lane, as a physical and symbolic space,

¹¹ This area encompassed places such as Fort William and parts of central Kolkata, including Dalhousie Square (now B.B.D. Bagh). The architecture here was grand, featuring European-style mansions, government buildings, and other structures that reflected Victorian architecture and prestige.

¹² This area included parts of North Kolkata, such as Sobhabazar, Bagbazar, and Chitpur. These areas were densely populated, with a mix of modest homes and economically diverse tenements, showcasing traditional Indian architectural styles and community life.

¹³ Wiszniewski, ‘Dover Lane’, pp. 218, 220-223.

¹⁴ Wiszniewski, ‘Dover Lane’, p. 223.

¹⁵ Wiszniewski, ‘Dover Lane’, p. 219.

¹⁶ Somdatta Chakraborty, ‘The ‘Threshold People’: Narrating Middle-Class Lives in Neoliberal Kolkata’, in *Beyond Consumption: India’s New Middle Class in the Neo-Liberal Times*, eds Manish K. Jha and Pushpendra (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 171-184.

¹⁷ Chakraborty, ‘Threshold People’, p. 178.

¹⁸ Manish K. Jha and Pushpendra (eds), ‘Contextualising India’s new Middle Class: Intersectionalities and Social Mobility’, in *Beyond Consumption: India’s New Middle Class in the Neo-Liberal Times* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 14.

¹⁹ Chakraborty, ‘Threshold People’, p. 172.

encapsulates this paradox, offering a portrait of Kolkata that is as much about resisting the erasure of the past as it is about embracing selective aspects of modernity.

This dynamic was illustrated in the ongoing 2014 restoration of the iconic Writers' Buildings in Kolkata. Efforts, led by experts from the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and Jadavpur University's Department of Architecture, aimed to remove layers of paint and cement to reveal the original Victorian-era red brick architecture.²⁰ Australian heritage expert Roger Beeston provided valuable guidance for this approach. While these plans proposed integrating modern, energy-efficient technologies, such as water harvesting and solar panels, to align with contemporary functional requirements, they underscored the city's dedication to heritage conservation. Although still underway, such initiatives demonstrate Kolkata's commitment to balancing the preservation of its historical legacy with the need for modern utility. This careful merging of architectural heritage and current technological advancements amplifies Kolkata's capacity to weave tradition with progress, ensuring the city's cultural essence remains intact amidst evolving urban demands.

The exploration of personal narrative and collective identity within urban spaces has been profoundly articulated in literature, where cities serve as cultural archives, 'repositories of memory' that shape both individual and shared identities.²¹ Kevin McNamara emphasises how urban literature does more than record the city's material aspects, claiming that it maps "social spaces and interactions," creating a "documentary record" that captures desires, motivations, and collective memory within the cityscape.²² Cities thus become locales where personal stories merge into larger sociocultural narratives, illuminating the multifaceted identities that emerge from urban living. This interplay of personal and collective identities is particularly vivid in cities in literature, which act as both physical settings and symbolic locales. As McNamara observes, literary depictions of cities allow for "experiential records of actual individuals" while standing for broader human experiences.²³ This reflective function invites readers to empathise with diverse urban experiences, showing how individual narratives interweave to shape collective identities and perceptions of a city.

Kamalika Bose, curator of *People Called Kolkata*, encapsulates this essence, describing Kolkata as "a compelling city of juxtapositions" where "monumental potentiality collides with staggering inertia" and "utopian romanticism confronts unrelenting realism."²⁴ The book captures the lived experiences of Kolkata's people, using their voices to document the city's collective character. Shuktara Lal's story, like others in *People Called Kolkata*, is not fictional; it draws on real experiences of actual residents, making it a work of urban ethnography. Lal's story, *18/76A Dover Lane*, unfolds with the transformation of a family home once owned by sisters Sutapa Roy,

²⁰ IANS, 'Kolkata's Iconic Writers' Buildings in Landmark Restoration (Heritage Feature)', *Business Standard*, 28 September (2014). At: https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/kolkata-s-iconic-writers-buildings-in-landmark-restoration-heritage-feature-114092800284_1.html.

²¹ Kevin R. McNamara (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²² McNamara, *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, pp. 5-6.

²³ McNamara, *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, p. 11.

²⁴ Kamalika Bose, *People Called Kolkata* (Mumbai: The People Place Project, E-book, 2019), p. 17.

a schoolteacher, and Sumana Mukherjee, a journalist based in Bengaluru. Following the passing of their parents—a scientist mother and a historian father with deep ties to Kolkata’s intellectual life—the sisters faced the decision of what to do with the house.²⁵ Partnering with Rajesh Sen, a friend and art enthusiast who had returned to Kolkata, they repurposed the house as The Zs’ Precinct, a public space blending art, history, and community.²⁶ Amidst the embrace of time-worn walls, lovingly restored to their past glory, The Zs’ Precinct comprises the artistic soul of Zarah’s Gallery and the opulent heart of Zoyah’s Treasury, serving as a sanctuary of design and a stage for gatherings that captivate the senses.²⁷

Lal’s narrative of Dover Lane showcases how individual attachments reflect a broader cultural ethos, making the personal narratives inseparable from the city’s collective identity.²⁸ The story of transformation is not merely practical but laden with the emotional weight of “memories [too powerful] for both of us” to ignore.²⁹ This shift, however, was “liberating and transformative,” allowing the house to become part of the city’s shared fabric.³⁰ This shift also exemplifies how such transformations can bridge heritage and modernity, resonating with the multifaceted character of Kolkata’s urban fabric where Dover Lane is a microcosm of Kolkata’s evolution, blending its cultural history with dynamic contemporary life and the lane represents a “cosmo-ecological collective life,” where modernity and tradition coexist, embodying the environmental and cultural sensibilities of its residents.³¹

Dover Lane is also more than a geographical marker; it is a repository of memory and cultural symbolism, representing the broader sociocultural dynamics of Kolkata. The narrative of *18/76A Dover Lane*, centred around the actual landmark of the same name, is one of cultural preservation and adaptation, offering a unique and authentic perspective on Kolkata’s evolving identity. Unlike any other literature or fictional portrayal of Dover Lane, *18/76A Dover Lane* stands as a rare documentation of urban identity, preserving the essence of spaces that are simultaneously personal and communal. Thus, *18/76A Dover Lane* is more than static landscape; it is a complex, living entity infused with history, identity, and memory. The transformation of such a space, particularly within the context of rapid urbanisation, raises critical questions about the preservation of cultural heritage and collective memory. This study focuses on the case of *18/76A Dover Lane* in Kolkata, exploring its metamorphosis from a private, ancestral home to The Zs’ Precinct, a cultural hub that embodies resistance to urban commodification. This serves as a testament to the

²⁵ Ajanta Chakraborty, ‘Restored Dover Lane Home to Turn Art Precinct’, *The Times of India*, 3 May (2017). At: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/restored-dover-lane-home-to-turn-art-precinct/articleshow/58503511.cms>.

²⁶ Shuktara Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, in *People Called Kolkata*, ed. Kamalika Bose (Mumbai: The People Place Project, E-Book, 2019).

²⁷ Rajesh Sen, ‘Dover Lane Story’, *Calcutta Architectural Legacies* (2016). At: <http://cal-legacies.com/dover-lane-story/>.

²⁸ Mudar Patherya, ‘If You Knew Calcutta the Way I Know Calcutta’, *Telegraph India*, 11 December (2023). At: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/places/if-you-knew-calcutta-the-way-i-know-calcutta/cid/1986170>.

²⁹ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 190.

³⁰ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 191.

³¹ Wiszniewski, ‘Dover Lane’, pp. 218-226.

intricate balance between maintaining the essence of the past and adapting to contemporary urban realities.

Henri Lefebvre's ideas on the social production of space illuminate this transformation. His 'trialectic' of 'perceived space' (*l'espace perçu*), 'conceived space' (*l'espace conçu*), and 'lived space' (*l'espace vécu*) reveals how space is not merely a backdrop for human activity but an active participant in shaping social relations.³² The transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs' Precinct exemplifies 'lived space,' where the house is a repository for collective memory and identity, resisting the commodification that often characterises urban redevelopment. Edward Soja's concept of 'Thirdspace,' built on Lefebvre's trialectic, offers a compelling framework for interpreting the narrative of *18/76A Dover Lane*, as this space encapsulates private memories while serving a broader urban identity. Defined as a realm where the real and imagined, the known and the unfathomable converge, 'Thirdspace' transcends the binary oppositions of public and private, historical and contemporary.³³ It is a space where Lefebvrian 'conceived,' 'perceived,' and 'lived' dimensions blend seamlessly, creating a hybrid zone of coexistence of contradictions, and lived experiences of cultural and communal significance.

Additionally, Michel de Certeau's notion of 'tactics' emphasises the subtle acts of resistance through which individuals reclaim spaces from dominant structures.³⁴ The decision by Sutapa Roy and Sumana Mukherjee to preserve their family home and infuse it with new purpose embodies this 'tactical' reclaiming, positioning The Zs' Precinct as a counter-narrative to the homogenising forces of urbanisation. Meanwhile, Gaston Bachelard provides a lens to appreciate the psychological and emotional resonance of the house, where memories and identity intertwine to create a lived experience that transcends its physical structure.³⁵ This research thus integrates these theoretical perspectives to interpret how the transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane contributes to broader discussions in urban and cultural studies. The analysis sheds light on how adaptive reuse can bridge past and present, offering a model for balancing heritage with modern utility while fostering community engagement and resisting commodification. The study underscores the potential for urban spaces to become sites of memory, identity, and resistance, enriching the urban fabric with a continuum of lived experiences and shared narratives.

18/76A Dover Lane within Lefebvre's 'Lived Space'

Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* positions space as a dynamic product of social relations and practices. According to Lefebvre, space is produced and constantly remade through human actions and interactions.³⁶ This concept underscores that space is intrinsically linked to the social

³² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

³³ Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-And-Imagined Places* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

³⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

³⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

³⁶ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 26-27.

and historical context in which it is embedded. For Lefebvre, space is not merely a backdrop for social activities but an active participant in social life. Lefebvre’s trialectic of ‘spatial practices’ offers a clear understanding of how space operates and is experienced.³⁷ ‘Perceived space’ relates to the material, and physical dimensions of space, where practical activities occur. ‘Conceived space’ refers to the plans, maps, and abstract ideas that shape how space is organised and controlled. Finally, ‘lived space’ encompasses the subjective and symbolic elements, where space is directly experienced and imbued with meanings drawn from personal, cultural, and historical narratives.

Specifically, Lefebvre’s ‘lived space’ provides an essential framework for interpreting the transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct as ‘lived space’ is directly experienced and imbued with symbolic meanings, shaped by the practices, memories, and social relationships of its inhabitants. It is a space where history and personal narratives converge with the physical structure, forming a dynamic entity that embodies collective memory and cultural identity. The transformation of the house at 18/76A Dover Lane shows how the repurposing of this ancestral home weaves together past and present, resisting the commodification typical of modern urban redevelopment.³⁸ This space carries the imprint of those who inhabit it, layering tangible reality with the memories, meanings, and emotions of past interactions. The sisters’ efforts to repurpose their family home reflect this layered complexity, transforming it from a purely private residence into The Zs’ Precinct, a public cultural space that still holds the echoes of their familial legacy.

Sutapa Roy and Sumana Mukherjee’s decision to repurpose the house into a community-oriented cultural hub reflects the essence of Lefebvre’s ‘lived space.’ Their narratives reveal that the house was not just a structure but an embodiment of personal and family history, a site of childhood memories, intellectual pursuits, and emotional bonds. Mukherjee’s remarks of “It was time for the house that we knew to create new memories, to be relevant again, for it to give back to the city that has given it—and us—so much,”³⁹ shows how the house’s identity transitioned from private to communal, blending the personal past with a broader social function. The sisters’ choice to transform the house into The Zs’ Precinct exemplifies Lefebvre’s concept of the ‘social production of space,’ where space is not passive but actively produced and shaped by social relations. Their decision was driven not only by practicality but by a desire to honour their parents’ cosmopolitan and inclusive legacy. The house’s new role as an art gallery and cultural space preserves its historical significance while inviting new experiences and memories, thus merging past and present in a single lived environment.

The sisters’ choice to retain personal items and contribute their grandfather’s spiritual texts to the Ramakrishna Mission and Uttarpara Public Library⁴⁰ demonstrates an extension of ‘lived space’ into the broader cultural landscape. Such acts exemplify the home’s continued symbolic function as a contributor to the city’s cultural heritage. Lefebvre’s notion of “space as a social

³⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 38-41.

³⁸ Jason Overdorf, “Inside the Movement to Save Kolkata’s Historic Buildings,” *Destinasian.com*, 30 May (2019). At: <https://destinasian.com/editorial/saving-kolkatas-architectural-heritage>.

³⁹ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 193.

⁴⁰ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 192.

product” is exemplified here: 18/76A Dover Lane becomes more than a physical location; it transforms into a shared cultural asset, enriched by both individual and collective memories.

Situating 18/76A Dover Lane within Sojaian ‘Thirdspace’

The transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct is an exemplary illustration of Soja’s ‘Thirdspace,’ where “everything comes together ... the real-and-imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable,”⁴¹ to create a space of lived and collective significance. ‘Thirdspace’ also embodies a hybrid, multifaceted realm that defies traditional dichotomies such as public/ private, physical/ mental, and historical/ contemporary. It is a space where contradictions coexist and lived experiences find a confluence with the Lefebvrian ‘conceived,’ ‘perceived,’ and ‘lived’ dimensions of spatiality to articulate a space that integrates both and opens up to the subjective, lived experience.⁴² In the case of The Zs’ Precinct, this theoretical lens offers insight into how the repurposing of a private, ancestral home into a public cultural space merges personal memories with broader urban identity, crafting a shared narrative that resists the homogenising forces of modern urban development.

In *18/76A Dover Lane*, Shuktara Lal captures the profound transformation of a house that once held intimate familial memories into a space of public engagement and cultural discourse. The decision made by sisters Sutapa Roy and Sumana Mukherjee to transform their family home into The Zs’ Precinct is not merely an act of adaptive reuse but a statement of cultural continuity. This process intertwines private recollections with public functions, creating a hybrid realm where personal and communal narratives converge. The ancestral home, rich with familial history, becomes a shared urban space that maintains its original essence while opening its doors to the community. This embodiment of Soja’s ‘Thirdspace’ challenges binary notions of private/public or historical/contemporary, producing a space rich with meanings that reflect the fluidity of cultural, historical, and personal narratives. The Zs’ Precinct as ‘Thirdspace’ also manifests as a realm where the intangible emotional weight of the past coexists with its utilitarian present. Roy’s reflection on the house’s restoration encapsulates this manifestation: “The spirit of the house is still there,”⁴³ she notes, even as it accommodates new functions. This sentiment underscores how the spatial reimagining retains the memories embedded within its walls while facilitating contemporary cultural use.

Soja argues that ‘Thirdspace’ is inherently transformative, characterised by its potential for social change and new interpretations of urban spaces.⁴⁴ In transitioning from a personal residence to The Zs’ Precinct, 18/76A Dover Lane exemplifies how ‘Thirdspace’ is constructed through social practice, memory, and cultural adaptation. The act of repurposing the house creates a dialogue between its former private status and its new public identity, blurring the boundaries between individual and communal experiences. The sisters’ accounts of their decision-making

⁴¹ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 56.

⁴² Soja, *Thirdspace*, pp. 66-67.

⁴³ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 193.

⁴⁴ Soja, *Thirdspace*, pp. 23, 84.

process emphasise how this transformation was both an act of preservation and a step towards communal engagement. Mukherjee’s recollection, “It was time for the house that we knew to create new memories, to be relevant again, for it to give back to the city that has given it—and us—so much,”⁴⁵ reflects the intrinsic merging of personal and public significance. It is also emblematic of how the house at 18/76A Dover Lane as ‘Thirdspace’ holds transformative potential, opening up a space that resists the reductive commodification often associated with urban redevelopment.⁴⁶ Instead of succumbing to pressures for commercial or residential standardisation, the house retains its unique character and cultural import. The Zs’ Precinct, therefore, becomes a living testament to how urban spaces can embody and project a synthesis of individual memory and collective identity.⁴⁷

The Zs’ Precinct operates not only as a physical space but as a node where private memories and community interactions meet. The sisters’ intent to maintain the essence of their parents’ open and cosmopolitan outlook is reflective of the active construction of ‘Thirdspace,’ where lived experience shapes, and is shaped, by the space itself. Roy and Mukherjee’s mother, a scientist, and father, a historian, imbued the house with an intellectual and inclusive atmosphere the sisters wished to preserve.⁴⁸ This continuity bridges the private lived space of the past with a new, shared environment that embodies these qualities and projects them outward.

This convergence invites an understanding of space as a repository of shared memory that actively resists erasure. The act of converting personal items into public artefacts—such as the donation of books to cultural institutions—further underscores this hybridisation.⁴⁹ It demonstrates how the house’s transformation respects its history while embedding it within the city’s collective cultural framework. Soja’s ‘Thirdspace’ concept comes alive here, as The Zs’ Precinct becomes a space of negotiation, where personal and collective narratives coalesce, producing a new, shared identity that serves the broader urban fabric of Kolkata.

The Role of de Certeau’s ‘Tactics’ in Reclaiming Space

Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* offers a compelling lens for examining the transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct, exemplifying how subtle acts of resistance can reclaim and redefine spaces. de Certeau distinguishes between ‘strategies’—the calculated plans imposed by dominant institutions and structures—and ‘tactics,’ the ingenious, everyday practices of individuals that subtly subvert and reimagine these structures.⁵⁰ ‘Strategies’ are employed by powerful institutions such as governments, corporations, or other dominant structures to create, organise, and control spaces and systems. These ‘strategies’ are grounded in a

⁴⁵ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 193.

⁴⁶ Clare J. A. Mitchell, ‘Entrepreneurialism, Commodification and Creative Destruction: A Model of Post-Modern Community Development’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (1998), pp. 273–286.

⁴⁷ Kamalika Bose, *Incentivizing Urban Conservation in Kolkata: The Role of Participation, Economics and Regulation in Planning for Historic Neighborhoods in Indian Cities*, Cornell University (MA. thesis, 2014).

⁴⁸ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, pp. 191–192.

⁴⁹ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 192.

⁵⁰ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 34–56.

position of power and are designed to maintain authority by clearly distinguishing between the entity implementing the ‘strategy’ and the external environment it seeks to manage. In contrast, ‘tactics’ are the everyday, improvised actions used by individuals who do not have control or ownership over spaces. Unlike ‘strategies,’ ‘tactics’ are not part of a comprehensive plan; instead, they are flexible, adaptive responses that seize opportunities as they arise, working within the constraints set by dominant structures. ‘Tactics’ allow individuals to navigate, personalise, and subtly subvert these imposed systems, reclaiming a measure of agency and reimagining spaces to fit their own needs and interpretations. In the context of urban spaces, ‘tactics’ become essential tools through which ordinary people and communities can reclaim their environment and assert agency against the homogenising force of commercial redevelopment.

The preservation and repurposing of 18/76A Dover Lane by Sutapa Roy, Sumana Mukherjee, and Rajesh Sen exemplify de Certeauian ‘tactics,’ demonstrating how personal decisions and adaptive practices can uphold cultural identity and resist commodification. In Kolkata, where rapid urbanisation often prioritises commercial interests over cultural continuity,⁵¹ the act of repurposing an ancestral home into The Zs’ Precinct becomes a significant gesture of resistance. The sisters’ journey was marked by the emotional and logistical challenges of maintaining a space steeped in memory. Mukherjee’s reflection on the process—“It was a process. Not easy, not short, not without its moments of self-doubt and indecision but ultimately liberating and transformative at multiple levels”⁵²—illustrates how their approach embodied de Certeauian ‘tactics.’ Their adaptive ‘tactic’ allowed them to transform the house into a place that preserved its past while opening itself to new narratives. By deciding against the easier path of selling or demolishing the house, Roy and Mukherjee reclaimed it as a space of cultural and personal memory, creating a site where the city’s collective identity could intersect with their own history.

Unlike grand, sweeping strategies employed by urban developers, the sisters’ choices were characterised by ‘tactical’ responses to the realities of preserving their house. These actions included retaining personal artefacts, incorporating their family’s history into the new functions of the house, and partnering with Sen to fund and oversee the restoration. Sen’s involvement brought an additional layer of ‘tactics’ into the project. Sen’s approach to the project—“My brief to myself was simple. I was going to restore the house to its original look, making it timeless”⁵³—was more than an act of preservation; it was a ‘tactical’ manoeuvre that ensured the house retained its original historical essence. The decision to maintain features such as original flooring, lighting, and furniture reinforced the continuity of the space’s identity, allowing it to resonate with its past even as it adapted to modern needs.

Bachelard’s ‘Poetics of Space’: The Emotional Resonance of the House

Gaston Bachelard’s offers an intimate understanding of how spaces, particularly homes, resonate

⁵¹ Ananya Roy, ‘Re-Forming the Megacity: Calcutta and the Rural–Urban Interface’, in *Megacities: Urban Form, Governance, and Sustainability*, eds André Sorensen and Junichiro Okata (New York: Springer, 2011), pp. 93–109.

⁵² Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 191.

⁵³ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 192.

on a deeply psychological and emotional level. Bachelard’s exploration of space moves beyond the material to uncover how places, imbued with memories and emotions, shape identity and imagination, describing the house as a “nest for dreaming, a shelter for imagining;” a sanctuary where experiences are not just remembered but continually reimagined.⁵⁴ This theoretical perspective is profoundly applicable to the transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct, illustrating how the house’s metamorphosis maintains its essence as a space of memory and imagination, even as it adapts to new functions. Bachelard’s assertion that “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” emphasises a house’s role as a psychological refuge that nurtures identity.⁵⁵ In the context of 18/76A Dover Lane, this notion of the house as a ‘nest for dreaming’ is visible in how it continued to evoke memories and emotions for Sutapa Roy and Sumana Mukherjee. More specifically, it is evident in Roy’s recollection of her visits during the renovation: “I’d feel like a stranger in my own house. I’m more used to it now. Overall, I think the spirit of the house is still there.”⁵⁶ This statement reveals how the house managed to maintain its identity, ensuring that it remained a ‘house’ in Bachelard’s sense—one that invites daydreaming and emotional engagement, even as it transitioned to a shared, public space.

Bachelard underscores the profound link between space and identity, illustrating that the spaces we inhabit, particularly our homes, play an essential role in shaping our sense of self. He argues that a house is not merely a structure but a vessel containing personal memories and experiences, which influence identity. Mukherjee’s reflection on the process—“If my people were no longer associated with a place, I could no longer call it my very own”⁵⁷—underscores Bachelard’s emphasis on the intimate link between space and identity. The sisters’ choice to repurpose the house into a cultural space was an act of maintaining their space (house) as a place where imagination and memory could thrive. Bachelard explores how different areas of the home act as repositories for memories and emotions, reflecting various aspects of our inner lives.⁵⁸ The ‘cellar,’ for instance, symbolises deep, ‘unconscious memories,’ while the ‘attic’ represents ‘thought’ and ‘imagination.’ In the narrative of 18/76A Dover Lane, this psychological symbolism resonates with the transformation of the house into The Zs’ Precinct. Specific objects, such as the extensive collection of books that filled the rooms, the grandfather’s spiritual texts, and cherished family heirlooms, embody this symbolism. The books evoke the intellectual legacy and creativity of the ‘attic,’ representing the parents’ scholarly and artistic influence. The spiritual texts, preserved and donated to institutions such as the Ramakrishna Mission and Uttara Para Public Library, reflect unconscious ties to heritage akin to the symbolism of the ‘cellar.’ The transformation thus transcends a physical renovation, embracing the house as a vessel that holds both hidden memories and the creative spirit of its former inhabitants.

⁵⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. viii.

⁵⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 193.

⁵⁷ Lal, ‘18/76A Dover Lane’, p. 191.

⁵⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 3-37.

Bachelard also states, “the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting,” illustrating that our earliest spaces shape how we perceive and interact with future environments through what he terms “organic habits.”⁵⁹ This conception suggests that space is deeply embedded in our being, influencing our interactions and reinforcing a sense of self. The renovation of 18/76A Dover Lane into a public space could have severed its connection to the sisters’ memories. However, the approach they took—preserving architectural elements and personal artefacts—ensured that the house remained a vessel for their family’s legacy. The decision to retain original furniture, fixtures, and books infused The Zs’ Precinct with layers of personal history, making it more than just a building repurposed for utility. This careful preservation aligned with Bachelard’s view that “a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.”⁶⁰ He argues that when a space is inhabited, it becomes more than its physical attributes, embodying the memories and essence of those who dwell within. This transforms the space into a living, poetic entity that reflects the nuances of human life and memory. Ergo, Bachelardian ‘poetics of space’ presents the house as integral to identity formation, showing that spaces hold and transmit the emotional and psychological imprints of their inhabitants. Roy and Mukherjee’s emotional investment in the house reflects Bachelard’s idea that lived spaces are inherently poetic, capturing the essence of life itself. The sisters’ memories of growing up, their parents’ intellectual pursuits, and the house’s ambiance were all preserved in its transformation, fostering a sense of continuity. By ensuring that these emotional layers remained part of the structure, they upheld the psychological bond between the space and its inhabitants, even as the house began to serve the wider community.

The emotional continuity of 18/76A Dover Lane underscores Bachelard’s concept that space can be both a physical and psychological refuge. The transformation of the house into The Zs’ Precinct was not an act of stripping away its past; it was a process of reinvigorating it. The sisters’ deliberate efforts to maintain their parents’ legacy within the fabric of the home reflect Bachelard’s understanding that ‘space’ becomes ‘poetic’ through the layers of lived experience it embodies. The house, as it stands today, is not merely a venue but a continuation of personal and collective stories that evoke nostalgia, belonging, and aspiration.⁶¹ Roy and Mukherjee’s decision to keep the space attuned to their family’s intellectual and artistic sensibilities ensured that the house remained an ‘inhabited space’—one that could still shelter dreams, both old and new. The ‘poetic’ quality of the house, as preserved in its transformation, allows it to resonate with visitors, embedding them within the continuum of its narrative. The Zs’ Precinct’s new role, hosting exhibitions and cultural activities, reinforces the idea that space can evolve while still holding true to its essence.⁶²

⁵⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 47.

⁶¹ TT Bureau, ‘A Treasure Trove of Style Picks with a Crafts Edge’, *Telegraph India*, 26 April (2018), <https://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/a-nbsp-treasure-trove-of-style-picks-with-a-crafts-edge/cid/1508636>.

⁶² Pooja Mitra, ‘In Pictures: Visual Artist Shohini Gupta Weaves Magic and Realism with ‘Patchwork Tales’’, *Telegraph India*, 28 December (2023). At: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/my-kolkata/people/visual-artist-shohini-guptas-upcycled-fabric-and-art-exhibition-at-the-zs-precinct-in-kolkata-photogallery/cid/1989918?slide=11>.

The transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct carries significant implications for urban and cultural studies, offering insights that extend beyond a single case study. This research underscores the potential of adaptive reuse as a strategy for maintaining cultural heritage while meeting contemporary urban needs. It challenges the prevailing paradigm of urban development, which often prioritises commodification and profit over historical continuity and community identity. This study presents a model for sustainable urban practices that honours cultural memory by adapting spaces to modern functions while preserving their unique character. The analysis of 18/76A Dover Lane shows that urban spaces are not just physical locations but living repositories of collective memory and identity. Theories from Henri Lefebvre’s ‘lived space’ to Edward Soja’s ‘Thirdspace’ illustrate that spaces are shaped by the narratives and social practices of their inhabitants. This understanding invites urban planners, architects, and policymakers to consider more nuanced and inclusive approaches that prioritise community engagement and cultural significance in redevelopment projects. By valuing personal and collective histories embedded within spaces, cities can foster environments that reflect their diverse social fabric and resist homogenisation.

Moreover, the concept of using adaptive reuse to resist the erasure of historical and cultural specificity speaks to a broader global context. Cities around the world face similar challenges of rapid urbanisation, where heritage sites are often overlooked or sacrificed for modern development. This research encourages the exploration of policies that support adaptive reuse, emphasising the need for frameworks that balance development with preservation, ensuring that cultural assets remain integrated within the urban landscape. The implications extend to community-led initiatives, showcasing the power of personal agency in reclaiming and redefining urban spaces. The case of 18/76A Dover Lane demonstrates that adaptive reuse, driven by residents and stakeholders, can contribute to a shared sense of place, fostering resilience and continuity in a rapidly changing urban environment.

Conclusion

The transformation of 18/76A Dover Lane into The Zs’ Precinct stands as a testament to the power of adaptive reuse in urban spaces. This case underscores the potential for spaces to serve as sites of resistance against urban commodification and as vessels for memory and identity. By employing theoretical frameworks such as Henri Lefebvre’s ‘lived space,’ and Edward Soja’s ‘Thirdspace,’ this research has demonstrated that urban environments can be more than static constructs—they can be living, dynamic entities infused with history and personal significance. The sisters’ choice to preserve and repurpose their ancestral home illustrates how spaces can embody both individual and collective narratives, merging the past with the present in a dialogue that defies the homogenising forces of modern urban development. The Zs’ Precinct’s transformation from a private home into a public cultural hub exemplifies how as a Lefebvrian ‘lived space’ and and Sojaian ‘Thirdspace,’ it holds the imprints of human experience and memory, resisting urban commodification’s erasure of social and cultural relations. Michel de Certeau’s concept of ‘tactics’

demonstrates how the sisters and Rajesh Sen's acts of preservation were subtle yet powerful methods of reclaiming space from the dominant narratives of profit-driven redevelopment. Their efforts ensured that the house maintained its original essence while adapting to new functions that align with the community's evolving needs.

Bachelard's 'Poetics of Space' further affirms that a house is more than its physical form—it is a reservoir of dreams, memories, and identity. This is evident in how 18/76A Dover Lane retained its emotional and symbolic significance through its adaptive reuse, bridging private and public spheres and allowing the space to continue being a part of the city's cultural and social fabric. For future research, comparative studies on similar adaptive reuse projects across different cities or cultural landscapes could provide deeper insights into how local practices influence urban identity and heritage preservation. Additionally, examining policy frameworks that either enable or obstruct such projects would shed light on the conditions necessary for sustainable and culturally resonant urban development.