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Article begins on next page
Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property: Middle Class Discourses of a Slum-Free Delhi

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Abstract: This paper examines the narratives through which associations of private property owners in Delhi depict slums as zones of incivility and “nuisance.” In tracing how this “nuisance talk” travels into and gains legitimacy in popular and state visions of urban space, the paper shows the role of discourse in justifying and enacting exclusionary urban imaginaries. As a lay term, nuisance is widely used to identify forms of aesthetic impropriety. But, as a primary element of environmental law, nuisance operates discursively as a catchall category allowing diverse private grievances to be expressed in terms of environmental welfare and the public interest. The widening depiction of slums as nuisances hence reworks the public/private divide, inserting once local codes of civility into the core of public life. By examining how nuisance talk circulates between property owners’ associations, the media, and the government, the paper shows how slum demolitions have become widely read as a form of environmental improvement.

Keywords: informal housing, public space, displacement, gentrification, India

Differentiation depends on disgust (Stallybrass and White 1986:191).

Slums are the culmination of unwanted elements (Secretary of a Delhi-based Residents Welfare Association).

Introductory Boundaries
A middle class “explosion” is upon us today (De Angelis 2010), marked by a global surge in consumer politics, deepening contestations over civility and public order, and the rise of new strategies for enacting privatized visions of socio-spatial change. Whether treated as a hegemonic culture, an income category, or a performative disposition, the middle class has (re-)emerged as a central sociological concept in studies of contemporary politics. This is particularly true in debates over neoliberalism and urban reform (see Rousseau 2009; Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez 2002), especially in the global South, where the construction of idealized urban environments is often seen as a necessary condition for either constructing an idealized, middle class citizenry or meeting the demands of an already existing middle class public (see Caldeira 2001; Gandy 2008; Guano 2002; Kanai 2010; Pow 2009; Searle 2008).

Within the Indian context, scholars have widely noted the increasing power of the middle class in making, as Partha Chatterjee (2004:ch 7) says, Indian cities “bourgeois at last” (also see Baviskar 2003, 2006; Benjamin 2008; Fernandes
Antipode 2004; Anjaria 2009; Harriss 2007; Nair 2005). Fernandes (2006:xxiii), for example, observes that India’s newly empowered middle classes “form civic and neighborhood organizations in order to reclaim public space and consolidate a style of living that can adequately embody its self-image as the primary agent of the globalizing city and nation”. Writing about Bangalore, Nair (2005:345) notes that these neighborhood associations “elevate the rituals and comforts of a middle-class domesticity to city-wide priority”. Indeed, students of the Indian city now agree that middle class norms of civility and civic virtue, as consolidated and mobilized through new associational practices, are as important as an “activist state” or “market forces” in producing new models of the urban (Ghertner 2011a; Anjaria 2009; Roy 2009). In Delhi alone, more than a million residents of informal “slum” settlements have been forcibly displaced over the past 10 years, largely through the political and legal action of associations of private property owners called residents welfare associations (RWAs) (Ghertner 2008; Ramanathan 2006).

While scholars have been attentive to the juridical and institutional transformations that have facilitated the rise of middle class power and the concomitant demolition of slums, removal of hawkers and beggars, and broader bourgeoisification of Indian cities, there has been minimal focus on how middle class groups’ mundane, often place-specific constructions of civility gain traction in state policy and the popular urban imaginary.¹ This paper addresses this question by analyzing the narratives through which activist RWAs construct slums as “nuisances”—that is, as zones of incivility that violate normalized codes of urban conduct and appearance. Tracing how RWAs’ everyday depictions of slums as dirty, uncivil and out of place—what I will call “nuisance talk”—travel into and gain legitimacy in popular representations and state visions of urban space, my aim is to account for how urban imaginaries take shape through concrete discursive practices. Thus, while most accounts of urban redevelopment in the global South, including India, emphasize the role of market equations and cost–benefit calculations in urban restructuring and its associated discourses (eg Hall and Hubbard 1998; Nijman 2008; Springer 2010; Wu 2003), I turn to the cultural politics of city making. I do so by locating Delhi’s ambitions to become “world-class” not in an abstract capital logic or process of “neoliberalization” (to which RWA members and state officials rarely conform; see Anjaria 2011), but rather in everyday contestations over the meaning of “the public” and proper uses of public space.

Following Moore, Kosek and Pandian (2003:44), I take cultural politics to mean the processes by which “people and nature are positioned as out of place, disturbing the natural and social order” and the various forms of “boundary work” through which geographies of inclusion and exclusion, purity and pollution are constituted. Such boundary work creates a bar against which social order can be evaluated, rendering that which falls below/outside the bar visibly deviant and in need of improvement or removal. In this paper, I draw from more than 50 conversations with RWA members and 4 months of ethnographic research conducted in 2006–2007 on RWA politics² to examine how RWAs position slums on the “outside”, both symbolically vis-à-vis idealizations of the bourgeois public sphere and private self as well as materially in terms of property value and urban form. I specifically argue that “nuisance” has become the key principle according to which discourses of the slum
are both organized in everyday speech and translated from the neighborhood into official policy and practice. As a lay term, nuisance is widely used to identify forms of aesthetic impropriety or private annoyance. But, because it is a primary element of environmental law in India (Jain 2005), it operates discursively as a catchall category allowing a diverse array of private grievances, often pertaining to the defense of private property, to be expressed in terms of environmental welfare and the public interest. As such, the widening depiction of slums as nuisances—that is, as illegal environments—reworks the public/private divide, inserting codes of civility once restricted to the home and neighborhood into the core of public life. This discursive redefinition of “the public” is a key means by which the current round of urban restructuring, including most prominently land privatization, is justified in Delhi.

Over the past 15 years, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), like state agencies in most Indian cities, has been gradually privatizing once public land with the goal of installing a more capital-intensive built environment (DDA 1997; Ghertner 2005; Jain 2003). From 1962 through the 1980s, the DDA acquired much of this land for low-income housing, most of which was left vacant as the DDA failed to develop adequate housing stock for the growing working class (DDA 1997; Verma 2002). However, because Delhi’s Master Plan entitled the urban poor to 25% of residential land in the city, politicians and state officials allowed workers to informally settle on undeveloped public land through the 1990s. State efforts to privatize this land, which began in the late 1990s, have thus had to contend with both the estimated 3 million residents of these informal settlements (MCD 2002), many of whom have been de facto formalized over the years, as well as Delhi’s legacy of more socialistic state planning that placed the worker at the center of public life. The delegitimation of the urban poor’s land entitlements and the displacement of slums from the urban imaginary have thus been necessary steps to justify the ongoing privatization of urban space. Herein lies the significance of nuisance talk, whose widespread circulation in recent years has allowed slum demolitions to be popularly read as a form of environmental improvement, a positive form of violence necessary to clean and green Delhi, install a new symbolic order, and further Delhi’s march toward “world-class city” status (the official aim of state plans; see DDA 2007).

By way of introducing how nuisance talk is mobilized in everyday speech, I begin with an extended account of my first encounter with an RWA actively mobilized against slums. This description demonstrates how nuisance talk operates across multiple discursive registers, linking intimate aversions around hygiene and class difference to state anxieties over security and environmental order. The multiple voices and antagonisms that emerge here provide insight into how nuisance talk pulls multiple speech acts together, cohering them into a discursive formation (Foucault 1976) that identifies the constitutive outside of bourgeois civility and provides a “scheme of perception” (Bourdieu 1998) for organizing the social world. I follow in the next section by theorizing how nuisance works as a spatial concept that frames a particular relationship between the public and private, on the one hand, and the “inside” and “outside” of social space, on the other. This provides a framework for understanding how neighborhood-based civility struggles elevate the private concerns of property owners, which also extend visions of the bourgeois inside into public space. Next, I detail how RWAs evoke specific geographical
imaginaries of transgression in everyday neighborhood speech and how these express neighborhood concerns in terms of a broader vision of a “world-class city”. I finally trace how these geographical imaginaries are transmitted through broader media and government campaigns into a governing rationality of slum removal.

**Sant Ravi Das Camp**

I had visited Sant Ravi Das Camp numerous times before, both in 2005 and leading up to its eventual demolition in May 2006. In the days before its demolition, I watched DDA surveyors enumerate the settlement’s households and eventually saw the bulldozers roll in and raze the more than 800 huts settled there. When I came back to Delhi 6 months after Ravi Das Camp’s demolition, I returned to the site, curious to see what the DDA had done with the open space (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The left and right photographs show two settlements, outlined in black, before (September 2004) and after (September 2006), respectively, the DDA demolished them on 4 May 2006. The larger of the two settlements, located on the left side of each of the two photographs, is the site of Sant Ravi Das Camp, and the smaller settlement located on the right side of the photographs is what was known as Sanjay Camp. The small “x” on the photograph on the right (shown below the former site of Ravi Das Camp) shows the position from which the photograph shown in Figure 2 was taken (© 2011 Google, © 2011 Europe Technologies, Image © 2011 Digital Globe)

A thick, concrete fence had been erected on all sides of the empty land, with yellow signs staked in the ground saying “Property of the DDA: Do not enter.” Dotted with mounds of rubble and scattered brick, the site lay vacant, except for a Hindu temple still nestled in the corner of the lot (see Figure 2). After I had parked my scooter and pulled out my camera, a shopkeeper approached me from the housing society across the street. We began talking about the scene before us.

I told the shopkeeper that I had visited months before when a basti (settlement) was here and wondered what had happened. With this subtle prompt, he launched into a tirade:

Those people were a major problem in the area. They made lots of noise, spread filth, and disturbed the area. They screamed a lot and made all kinds of noise. They were always drunk and would fight for no reason. The space was such a mess. There were a thousand huts here and many thousands of people. They were such dirty people ... But, don’t think they were poor. They just occupied the land, took rent on it, and got rich ...
We filed a petition in court, and the court had them removed. The place is better now, no?³

Pointing across the vacant lot, he asked me how things looked. I was not sure what to say. It appeared quite ruinous, with the foundations of huts and other signs of the previous inhabitants still visible. “Seems okay,” I said, to which he quickly shot back, “Yeah, it is nice. It is good place now. It is clear and peaceful and quiet. There is no filth, no more noise and troubles. The air is totally clean. It’s beautiful, no?” He then offered to walk me around and introduce me to his neighbors.

The first person we met as we strolled around the neighborhood was a man in his early 70s, perched against the society’s boundary fence. The shopkeeper addressed him as “Uncle”: “Uncle can tell you about all the problems we had.” “Oh my,” Uncle began, “these people troubled us so much. They would just come into our park and do latrine,” as he looked over his shoulder to a small playground. “There was filth everywhere. We couldn’t use our own park. It was so bad we wanted to sell our homes and leave, but we couldn’t sell. The price fell so much, and it took a lot of time. As soon as anybody saw the huts here, they weren’t interested. The stench of fish and meat destroyed the atmosphere.” Uncle then said the value of his flat had increased threefold after the demolition: “I was only offered 7 lakh before. Now people are selling for more than 20! But, what’s the reason to leave? Now this will become a posh area.”

Our next encounter was with a carpenter who was renting a flat in the housing society and used to rent a hut in Ravi Das Camp for storing his supplies. The
shopkeeper joked that the carpenter, like the slum dwellers, had earned excessive profit through his slum business, a claim the carpenter disputed along with the shopkeeper’s repeated suggestion that the slum residents were actually rich due to the free government services they received. As a participant in the slum economy, this man challenged the shopkeeper and Uncle’s effort to draw a sharp distinction between the residents of their lower-middle class housing society and the slum: “I have lived here for 32 years. I came here to build for the Asiad [Asian Games in 1982] and applied for an LIG [lower income group] flat, like here. But, it wasn’t in my fate. You had good fate. Maybe I’ll get one some day.”

The shopkeeper and Uncle live in DDA-built LIG flats, constructed by the earliest residents of Ravi Das Camp who were recruited, employed and settled by a government contractor in the early 1980s. Through the 1970s and 1980s, DDA flats were the primary means to access land in Delhi, but the DDA failed to provide the quantum of housing mandated by the Delhi Master Plan, leading to the gross under-provision of planned housing in the city, especially in the LIG and EWS (economically weaker sections) categories—the two lowest income classifications the DDA uses (Verma 2002). Due to the shortage of housing, competition to obtain a DDA flat was (and still is) fierce; fewer than 10% of applicants receive flats. Most lower-income groups that are denied DDA housing either rent or move to slums and unauthorized colonies. The carpenter’s “bad” fate, he hinted, was based on this fact. If Uncle and the shopkeeper had not been in the lucky 10%, they would have been like the carpenter and slum dwellers: unpropertied.

After Uncle and the carpenter took their leave, the shopkeeper walked me through the gate into the housing society, where we met three men who had just returned from work. The shopkeeper introduced me and said I wanted to know about the old slum. Again, with little prompting, they began describing how much their lives had improved after the demolition. One of the men pointed at my scooter and said, “see your helmet there? If you had left it like that [unlocked] before, it would have been stolen right away. You couldn’t have even parked there! I wanted to buy a car, but had no place to park it safely. Out there anything could have happened.”

The four of us sat for tea on plastic chairs directly in front of the large iron gate that enclosed the society’s inner road from the main street, our backs to the park where Uncle had been standing, and the former site of Ravi Das Camp a stone’s throw away. The shopkeeper retreated to his shop. After introductions, we returned to the topic of the slum. One man began, “Before, we wouldn’t have been able to sit here like this. There would have been so much crowd. Those people walked straight in and used our park and bothered us so much. Our own children couldn’t play here.”

The three men looked out over the empty lot, as if it were a picturesque landscape: “It is so clear. The weather is also nicer now. You feel the wind, right? Before, we didn’t have such wind.”

When I asked what they did to avoid the trouble of the slum, they said they installed the gate to prevent the slum residents from entering, but “they threatened us, so we had to open it in the day.” The man hosting us, whose flat was on the ground floor and just two doors down from the main road, pointed at the iron grilling in front of his veranda and said he built this wall with a roof and locking
gate to prevent theft: “I have valuable things out there. Without this, those people would have just taken it all . . . For security, I built this cage and locked my own family in, like animals, but the real animals were out there!” Turning to the other men, he laughed at his joke, “Imagine the state we were in!” The other men nodded in approval, watching me laugh at what seemed a familiar line to them.

Later in our conversation, I asked about the temple still erect on the empty plot. One of the men said the DDA could not clear it because it is religious, adding:

The land there is worth lakhs of rupees. They run a guesthouse out of it so people from Bihar can come stay. The people who run it are Bihari. Now they are making their own little Bihar here! The rest of the people, we had them thrown out. They lived in trash; wherever they went, our roads, our parks, filth also came . . . They were filth. We had them tossed.”

While Ravi Das Camp had been cleared many months before, the symbol of the slum continues to operate in these narratives as the constitutive outside against which property bearing and middle class selfhood is defined. Against the filth and disorder of the slum, the housing society emerged as “posh”. Against the violence and decay of slum life, the men found the caring and secure home. The stories the shopkeeper and his neighbors told me that day had been recited time and time again, supplying a generative symbolism for distancing self from slum. This was a division that had to be actively maintained, lest categorical mixture between the inside and outside return, as was shown by the ambiguous status of the carpenter, who differed from the rest of the men based merely on his “luck”.

I begin with an extended description of this encounter because it highlights the metonymic associations RWAs in Delhi frequently make between dirt and slums (eg “they were filth”), as well as how such associations are used to enforce the social and physical boundary between private property and slum (inside and outside). Following Douglas’s (1966) formulation of dirt as “matter out of place”, scholars have long noted how talk of dirt and excrement is used to represent residual people and places: “excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without” (Kristeva 1982:71). As Sibley (1995:56) remarks on the symbolic distancing of rich from poor that accompanied spatial segregation in the nineteenth century capitalist city, “the middle classes have been able to distance themselves from their own residues, but in the poor they see bodily residues, animals closely associated with residual matter, and residual places coming together and threatening their own categorical scheme under which the pure and the defiled are distinguished”. Stallybrass and White (1986) similarly trace how nineteenth century schemes to reorder the city operated as purification processes, designed to either exclude groups associated with pollution—slum dwellers, prostitutes, the unemployed—or morally reform them through close surveillance and disciplining, a practice deepened in the colonial context (see Gooptu 2005; Legg 2007; Prakash 1999; Prashad 2001).

This “unattainable desire to expel those things which threaten the boundary” (Sibley, 1995:19) is what Kristeva has theorized as abjection, where the abject is “everything that the subject seeks to expunge in order to become social” (McClintock 1995:71). I am interested here not so much in psychic processes
of abjection (revulsion, disavowal, fetishism) by which the self encounters and affectively registers the other, but rather in showing how such processes are transformed into political processes of abjection—in this case the large-scale removal of slums as abject objects/outsiders. Nuisance talk, as the above narrative demonstrates, attributes the aesthetic annoyances and daily hassles of urban life to a particular “outside” subject—the slum dweller, the migrant, the street vendor. But, although most speakers engage it only in this way, nuisance talk’s effect, as a discourse, does not stop here. As it circulates, gains a larger “coalition” of speakers, and produces agreed-upon “truths” about the proper organization of space, it also articulates the “unbelonging” of that outside subject to a broader urban politics. That is, the “truth” of slum illegality and unbelonging operates beyond the influence and even intentions of those engaged in nuisance talk, gathering political force through its taken-for-grantedness in popular, and even state and legal, contexts. To provide an initial glimpse into how this works, which I elaborate in the remainder of the paper, I turn briefly to the legal case against Ravi Das Camp.

The men with whom I sat that day were members of the local RWA who, along with two neighboring RWAs, filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Delhi High Court in 2002 that led to Ravi Das Camp’s demolition in 2006. I obtained a copy of the RWAs’ petition later, through which the same description of slum filth enters the domain of the judiciary:

[The encroachment [Ravi Das Camp] ... has now grown and taken a mammoth shape threatening the natural environment in the area and has started jeopardising the life of the residents of the area by posing problems ... like pollution of all sorts, health hazards, insanitary conditions due to garbage dumping ... blocks of roads ... and also giving rise to social problems like theft, robbery etc. and has threatened the security of the residents.]

Like in the RWA members’ conversation with me, the slum emerges in the petition as an illegal environment based purely on its aesthetic impropriety and the nuisance it causes to property-owning residents of the city. Yet, as I have demonstrated elsewhere (Ghertner 2008), the courts, in response to a surge in RWA-filed PILs, have since the early 2000s begun to accept such arguments about “the nuisance of slums” as a legitimate basis for slum removal. In the case against Ravi Das Camp, the High Court thus concurred with the RWAs’ nuisance argument, ordering the slum’s demolition because it “deprives the rights of citizens of Delhi” to civic amenities and degrades public space. How has “nuisance talk”, an often particularistic set of speech acts expressing local environmental anxieties and social aversions, moved from everyday neighborhood conversation into state discourse and urban strategy? How do such specific statements of disgust circulate, become commonsensical, and gain official legitimacy? To address these questions, it is necessary to consider how the politics of public space play out through contestations over the “inside” and “outside”.

**Inside Out: Bourgeois Contestations Over the Public**

Scholars of colonial and postcolonial India have long acknowledged how constructions of middle class selfhood have been “replete with these themes of
the enclosed inside and the exposed outside” and the “protective power” inhering in the symbolic and material boundaries dividing these two domains (Chakrabarty 1992:542). Chakrabarty, for example, finds that the “outside”, at least for middle class Hindus, “always carries ‘substances’ that threaten one’s well-being” (542) and “produces both malevolence and exchange between communities and hence needs to be tamed” (544). Extending Chakrabarty’s insights, Kaviraj (1998) examines the uneven articulation of colonial and postcolonial efforts to produce a bourgeois public sphere with Hindu conceptions of inside/outside. He begins by insisting, following Chatterjee (1993), that the inside/outside dualism in India is if not orthogonal to, then at least operates on a different, non-parallel plane from, the private/public dualism introduced under colonial rule. By emphasizing the historical specificity of the rise of the public sphere in the modern West, he differentiates the Western concept of “the public” from uses of open space in pre-colonial India that might better be called “common”—a less official, undocumented, and informal domain in which mutually agreed upon uses of open space contingently accrete, but which can just as easily dissipate. Common space is therefore regulated less by the stable rules of a modern bureaucracy than by norms of civility and sociality that emerged between private parties. Highlighting various examples of how the Western and Indian “publics” do not neatly overlap, Kaviraj argues that whereas the Western concept of the public is the product of “a tendency toward universality”—that is, “the idea that an activity is open to all, irrespective of their social attributes”—“the Hindu social universe works in the reverse direction. Small cohesive units like the family, which uses a universally understood distinction between apan/par (own/others or self/not-self), designate spheres of restricted inclusivity” (Kaviraj 1998:90).

Here, the inside stands not for the private—since, for example, the middle class Indian home is often shared by an extended family “and is not driven by a desire to be left alone” (Kaviraj 1998:94)—but rather represents a realm of security and stable, patterned relationships against which stands the outside—an inhospitable and unordered domain of mixing, surprise and potential offense. The inside/outside division can be perhaps best exemplified by the case of household rubbish: while the middle class kept their households meticulously clean, the waste they so fastidiously gathered was disposed of by simply throwing it over the house’s boundary wall. This act, Kaviraj argues, shows that the “street was the outside, the space for which one did not have responsibility, or which was not one’s own . . . . It was merely a conceptually insignificant negative of the inside . . . [not] a civic space with norms and rules of use of its own” (Kaviraj 1998:98).

For the property-owning middle class, “open spaces” become “public places” through the introduction of “civility”: rules of order and access that adhere to the logic of “the inside”. The colonial park best exemplifies this:

Parks were effectively extensions of the Bengali pada or residential neighbourhood, where families normally had stable, long-term residences and every household knew every other . . . These spaces were characterised by sociability in which the relation between people was not the transient reciprocity of interests but more stable common pursuits, temperaments, social bonding. People from lower orders would be allowed ingress, but in strictly defined and restricted roles—as sellers of snacks, malis or municipal gardeners, or servants (Kaviraj 1998:102).
In this way, “middle-class publicity” is restrictive rather than inclusive and is premised on the extension of bourgeois standards of comportment, appearance, cleanliness, and sociability into the neighborhood and park. For the unpropertied poor, in contrast, “the public” “came to mean that which is not private, spaces from which they could not be excluded by somebody’s right to property” (Kaviraj 1998:104), an idea they used to lay claim to the outside.

For Kaviraj, these “middle class” and “plebian” conceptions of the public collide to either maintain a properly bourgeois public order or to plebianize public space. He ends his paper with a description of the latter, the dominant trend from the 1960s through the 1990s in Indian cities: “As the pressures on the city grew more intense, the fortresses of the middle class started falling, and being divested of their generally aesthetic function, the parks opened to the poor” (Kaviraj 1998:106). Chatterjee (2004) relies on a similar reading of the contraction of middle class cultural and political space through the 1980s in developing his formulation of political society and civil society—where the former is the terrain on which the poor struggle to defend their access to unregulated public spaces, and the latter the terrain on which propertied classes defend and expand their private privileges.

Kaviraj and Chatterjee’s conception of the uneven mapping of inside/outside and private/public provides a useful starting point for understanding the contemporary politics of public space in Indian cities. Yet, they offer highly typological analyses that gloss over the constitutive role of struggle in securing these different configurations of the public. In Kaviraj’s (1998:109) case, the plebianization of public space is an effect of population growth more than politics, a reading that allows him to claim that this process “appears irreversible” (108). In Chatterjee’s case, the switching point from plebianization to the current round of bourgeois urbanism is left unexplained. Nonetheless, I want to suggest that their formalistic schema can be applied in a more processual manner. Doing so means considering more carefully the complex intersections between the “private” and the “inside”, as well as the role of property and the rights it bestows in defining the “public”.

Drawing from Kaviraj’s framework, the private stands for the ability to exclude others, operating more as a legal domain of rights and exclusions, whereas the inside is a symbolically secured domain, particular to individuals and class groups (ie one person’s inside can be another’s outside), in which interactions, whether public or private, are predictable and venerated. For the poor, the inside is always lived in public (since they lack a legally defined “private”) and bourgeois civility is experienced as rules and limits on access and mobility. This allows us to see plebianization as a gradual process by which the bourgeois “inside” contracted, receding into the “private” as the “civility” of public culture eroded. Contemporary efforts by RWAs to reclaim public space, in contrast, are attempts to reverse plebianization by projecting the bourgeois inside beyond home into the neighborhood and city at large.

Figure 3 shows a schematic representation of this process, my own attempt to specify a spatial politics of RWA activism. This will serve as a theoretical starting point for analyzing RWA commentaries in the following sections. The inner polygon labeled “bourgeois inside” represents a domain of stable relations, but which gradually dissipate (indicated by the shading) as one moves away from the more...
Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property

Figure 3: Schematic of residents welfare associations’ spatial practice in Indian cities

private realm of the home (again, the private exists within the inside). The “outside” is a less predictable domain of mixing and, for the bourgeois family, potential offense and risk. Contemporary urban spatial politics for the middle class and the RWAs that represent them consist of an effort to project the norms of appearance and civility found within the “bourgeois inside” into previously “outside” spaces. If successful in doing so, bourgeois “public” space is secured/civilized. As a simplified example, the “inside” might represent an existing neighborhood, where a primary RWA spatial strategy is to fortify that neighborhood into a secure enclave, sequestered from the threats of the outside (eg the iron gate the housing society members built). A secondary strategy, then, is to establish aesthetic norms and rules of order in spaces even beyond the immediate neighborhood (eg parks, streets, or the city as a whole), as in the RWA’s attempt to remove Ravi Das Camp described above. This is an effort represented in the figure by the dashed arrow expanding the “bourgeois inside” into formerly “outside” space. This is a spatial politics of (re-)civilizing public space, and it suggests how local civic struggles might cohere into broader spatial strategies.\(^1\)

I now turn to a more detailed account of how this process is discursively justified and symbolically represented among RWAs through “nuisance talk”. What I seek to show is how discursive portrayals of slums as nuisances—that is, as illegal environments—are part of a spatial politics of criminalizing aesthetically “improper” uses of bourgeois public space. That is, uses of “public” space (located in the polygon labeled “public” in Figure 3) that do not conform to bourgeois codes of civility acquire the label “nuisance”, an actionable offense under environmental law. As a side note, nuisances are spatially specific activities, meaning an action becomes a nuisance only if it infringes upon the bourgeois inside (cf Cooper 2002; Valverde 2011). The same activity if relocated to the “outside”—that is, to its rightful place—is unlikely to be considered a nuisance.

**Nuisance Talk**
After my encounter with the RWA members adjacent to Ravi Das Camp, I began contacting other active RWAs in Delhi to ask them about their perceptions of slums and urban space. Most RWA members were enthusiastic to meet me, calling me

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to their homes or offices after I reached them by phone. Upon meeting, I usually initiated conversation by describing my research, where I study and live, and my interest in RWAs and urban governance. In most cases, my interlocutors would follow not with a response to my research interests, but rather with their reflections on the contrasting civic culture in Delhi and abroad, usually the USA. In fact, we rarely even began talking about RWA matters until they had sufficient time to display their knowledge of and, in many cases, admiration for the West. As one man said:

Oh, California, such a lovely place! Where do you live, San Francisco, L.A.? ... I took a trip there while visiting my son in Arizona ... When I first went there—it must have been ten years ago—Delhi was some 30 plus years behind. Today, we have caught up so much. We must be only 10 years behind now. Much better, but still a way to go.

Such comments provided an opportunity for me to then ask about their perceptions of Delhi, as in, “In what ways is Delhi behind?”

Across a diverse array of neighborhood-specific concerns, most RWA members, especially those in wealthier South Delhi colonies, expressed a clear desire for Delhi to become “world-class”. When I asked what a “world-class” city meant to them, they often gave examples of the Delhi Metro, a new shopping mall, or the city’s preparations for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, but they most often expressed a general sense of a clean, comfortable and what I will describe as a “nuisance-free” public life. Regardless of how optimistic they were that Delhi would become “world-class”, residents agreed that Delhi required a significant upgrade in infrastructure, services, and visual appearance. In an in-depth survey of 25 RWA members that I conducted in 2006, all respondents agreed that a “slum-free Delhi” was either “very important” or the “most important” factor in Delhi becoming world-class. 12 All RWAs with whom I spoke stressed the value of their neighborhood-specific efforts in terms of their contribution to increasing the quality of life in, and appearance of, Delhi as a whole. For example, the secretary of an RWA in one of south Delhi’s wealthiest colonies said, “Our goal is to maintain and enhance the posh character of [the colony],” an effort that he directly linked with the image of Delhi as a whole:

I had a friend whose boss was visiting from Germany. They were driving in [the colony], and he had just told his boss how [it] is one of Delhi’s poshest areas. Just then, some pigs crossed the street. He was so embarrassed! No matter what we do, this city is still a mess. We have to do more to change things and put the proper systems in place. Everyone needs to get together and make Delhi look like a planned city.

One of the main problems his RWA worked to solve in both his colony and in Delhi as a whole was the presence of hawkers and other “street encroachments”, as he called them:

[The hawkers that operate under the Tehbazari scheme [a license program granting temporary vending rights] are a big problem. They aren’t supposed to cook in the open, but they do. They create filth, causing danger to human life and making the colony unsightly. They sit in an unauthorized way, cook and create filth ... Near “D block” ... 20–25 rickshaws stand there and eat breakfast. People taking morning walks have to see this. It’s not a pleasant sight to see auto drivers eating their breakfasts and then easing themselves, just taking a leak on the street. We aren’t against the poor people trying to live, but are against the creation of filth and unhygienic living conditions.
We here see how grievances of a primarily aesthetic nature—the hawkers as eyesores, as stains on an otherwise “posh” landscape—gain expression through a rhetoric of public health, hygiene, and public nuisance. His main complaint was not about illness in the neighborhood or noxious smells, but rather the appearance of “filth” and a general revulsion of the senses. This statement also demonstrates the manner in which RWAs frequently depict their interventionist efforts to structure and discipline public life as a struggle to secure “the inside” from the alien and impure threats of “the outside”. This RWA secretary moved on to say, “Overall, we are against traffic flow and outsiders entering into the colony unnecessarily”—thus marking his move from the identification of an abject object (hawkers) to the formulation of a spatial politics of abjection (displacing outsiders in order to “maintain and enhance the posh character” of the colony).

Most RWA members with whom I met similarly attributed neighborhood deficiencies to external forces, whether visible or remote—an effort to not only define external threats in need of disciplining, but also forge a community (the “inside”), like all political communities, in which incivility is necessarily exogenous (Watts 2004). After I asked a South Delhi RWA member, a retired man in his seventies, what the main problems his RWA faced were, he responded with his own question: “Did you smell the nallah [drain] on your way in?” I had noticed the strong smell of sewage in his otherwise upscale neighborhood, but was unsure whether I should conceal this fact out of courtesy. I hesitated, and he proceeded: “There is a nallah outside our boundary wall and slums and their fecal matters and foul materials ruin things here.” I asked him where the slum was located, and he said his RWA had won a 3-year court battle that eventually led to the slum’s demolition earlier in the year:

The problem was that the DDA was letting people occupy the land. In the city there are 35 lakh [3.5 million] slum dwellers . . . This has given rise to crime because they are mostly unemployed and coming from all states. A car was stolen here even . . . They occupy public land, set up jhuggis [huts] and create health hazard. Because the infrastructure in the city isn’t even enough for [real] inhabitants, so they should stop immigration from these countries: Nepal, Bangladesh, West Bengal, Bihar . . . These people used to roam into this area; their children played here. Our children couldn’t even go outside. These people are a different lot.

He went on to describe how neighborhood crime had gone down after the slum’s removal and how the quality of public services in the city would only improve by demolishing the city’s remaining slums. When I asked him why the stench of the nallah remained even after the slum’s demolition, he conceded that the environment of the colony had not improved with the removal of the slum, but attributed the sewage not to other formal colonies, most of whose untreated sewage flows through such nallahs across the city and directly into the Yamuna River, but rather to an upstream slum: “The root cause for the filth is the slum. Delhi is infested by this problem.” Referring to the problem of open defecation, he continued, “Just travel by train and you’ll see along the tracks how people behave. It’s shameful.” Despite the physical distance between slums and his residence, this man attributed waste in his social environment to the slum problem, bolstering his claim by referring to the aesthetic impropriety of the poor who, in their compulsion to openly defecate, he...
argued, were the source of urban decay. When I asked him about the legal basis for his RWA’s court petition against the old slum, he replied, “Basically, these people do not belong in Delhi . . . They ruin Delhi’s environment. They don’t follow any of the rules and create so much nuisance. This is a posh colony. How can we have such slums nearby?”

Even in colonies with no nearby slum, RWA members often described slums as a source of disease and danger that if not controlled would spread into purer spaces like neighborhood and home. One man exemplified this in describing how a scorpion had crawled out of the drain in his kitchen sink while his wife was using it: “She was very frightened. This is a dangerous thing! I mean, it can’t kill you, but it’s dangerous. Now how does a scorpion come out of a drain like that?” Responding to my confusion, he proceeded to answer his own question, “All these sewers are connected. Our waste flows into them, and the slum waste flows into them before ours. It is all mixed. This scorpion just climbed through the sewer and came into our house.” Here, he was signaling the invisible risk of the slum through the city’s subterranean and public infrastructure. The scorpion represented a violation of the bourgeois inside, the perceived threat that the sanctity of the home could be punctured at any moment by external risks. Even the boundary walls, security guards and dogs dividing his home from the street could not tame the disease that overflows from the slums. Whereas this man had begun his conversation with a partial recognition that the degraded state of slums was the product of social conditions for which slum residents were not themselves responsible (namely, a shortage of low-income housing), the social origins of slum degradation were quickly elided in his move to refer to the natural, animal essence of the slum. It is here, in stories about invasion and savagery, that the metonymic association of filth with slums is often displaced by a metaphoric language of the slum dweller as animal, a theme that emerged in a number of my interviews. As one RWA President proclaimed, “These people live with dogs and pigs. Of course their habits will be like that only.” “Slums,” he continued, “aren’t part of society; they aren’t integrated. And, anything not integrated into society can’t last forever . . . They have to be removed. They are all bound to be relocated.” When he realized that I might find his words unethical, he said, “Slum people are used to going from place to place. It’s natural for them.” Animalized slums; naturalized dispossession.

If not through the transgression of the boundary separating human and animal, then RWAs seeking to justify their aggressive stance vis-à-vis slums evoked transgressions of “natural” boundaries dividing the urban from the rural, educated from uneducated, and Indian from alien. As one RWA president told me:

The people who have encroached on parks here by habit don’t develop a taste for sanitation . . . We haven’t yet changed the culture of these people to be urban. We need to change the rural mindset. We need to change the attitude to cleanliness and responsibility. All people in Delhi were once migrants. These people need to change or else they don’t belong in the city.

To re-iterate, my argument is not that this type of neighborhood speech is in some way new, as social constructions of class and caste have always rested on
constructions of taboo and unbelonging. Rather, what is significant here is the way in which this everyday speech is molded into a larger discursive formation as it is taken up by the media, state, and judiciary. That is, nuisance talk becomes part of a discourse of world-class city making, where the category “nuisance” provides the key pivot combining bourgeois claims to the moral and aesthetic value of private property with an environmental claim to public welfare. Nuisance talk hence articulates with and is picked up by other ongoing interventions to civilize public space, such as heightened state concerns about crime and public order, as well as increased middle class worries about the “origins” of domestic servants and associated police efforts to monitor the “floating population” of itinerant workers. As a result, nuisance talk often slides between these different registers, depicting slums as spaces of both environmental and social decay.

It is in this way that the abovementioned trope of the slum-dwelling migrant unhabituated to urban life dovetails with a more deeply rooted neo-Malthusian concern about resource scarcity and overpopulation. Delhi’s second largest RWA federation, called People’s Action, has hence staked out an explicitly anti-immigrant political platform, drawing popular support from the widespread belief that shortages in electricity and water supply are caused by overpopulated slums and not rising middle class consumption. As Sanjay Kaul, a savvy media professional and the spokesman for People’s Action, told me in an interview in his office, “the biggest problem for Delhi is that 500,000 people come here every year . . . Delhi can’t become world-class if it lets 5 lakh people in tattered clothes come to the city . . . It can’t be world-class without security.” He continued, saying:

In Delhi, those who legitimately own land, pay taxes and those with papers are getting pushed out of the city to the satellite cities because the prices are going up so much from letting illegal occupation go on for political benefit . . . The culture of illegality is crowding out the good, working man who buys land and pays taxes . . . You are marginalized if middle class and educated.13

This “culture of illegality”, according to Kaul, contaminates not only physical space, sullying neighborhoods and street sides, but also political space, producing “vote bank” politics and corruption. The response to the slum problem, then, requires measures both to insulate important decision-making processes from the poor [a project I discuss in Ghertner (2011a)], as well as to bolster physical security within colonies.

Nuisance on the Move
A primary strategy that individual RWAs deploy to reclaim “their city” is to fortify and securitize their neighborhoods by building fences, closing colony entrances at night, and increasing the number of hired security guards. Such efforts are considered necessary to ensure neighborhood security, a primary concern among RWAs. An RWA secretary in West Delhi thus stated that the main goal of his RWA was to turn his residential block, a pocket of 400 houses and approximately 2000 residents, into a “sub-city”—a vision of a privatized, urban utopia shared by many RWAs:
We would have our own small market with only approved vendors and shops so the residents don’t have to go outside for daily requirements. There would be a food supplier, a dhobi [clothes washer], milkman, daily rations, all these things. We would have the colony fully developed and maintained by the RWA only. So the RWA would be in charge of services and oversight; it could also manage the primary school and childcare for young children. We would build gates and have permanent security guards to monitor who could enter and when . . . We are now trying to work with the police to start a checking system for security enhancement. We want to check domestic workers and record their information.

Unlike other cities that have experienced new forms of urban segregation in the wake of economic liberalization (see Caldeira 2001; Davis 1990), however, Delhi has not seen a marked increase in violent or property crime. After asking Pankaj Agarwal, the Secretary of Delhi’s RWA Joint Front, which is the largest RWA federation in Delhi with over 400 member RWAs, about why there is so much opposition to slums, he said:

they drain resources, create security problems, and create negative impression in the minds of tourists when they see beggars on the streets . . . You see, today, a house costs some 3–4 crore rupees [~$750,000–$1,000,000]—for a small house. The middle class has to pay so much to live here, and then to have all these security problems. The middle class is discriminated against.

I interjected and asked what security problems slums cause, and he replied, “The feeling is there that crime is a problem, even if it is not true. It is a psychological feeling.”

These feelings are enhanced by sensational media coverage of violent crime and dangerous slums, which depict an increasingly violent city in need of securitization, despite a significant decline in crime over the past decade. Without questioning the basis of the police analysis—namely, the absence of a sociological study to back the police report—or interviewing criminologists with competing hypotheses, The Hindustan Times, for example, reported that the “Police’s annual crime report attributes the incidence of sexual abuse to a number of sociological factors, including mushrooming of JJ clusters [slums] and sub-human living conditions. Last year, about 80 per cent of the accused belonged to the poor strata.” It further drew upon the fallacy of rising crime to justify RWA securitization when it stated in the same article, “With murders and burglary increasing by the day, security concerns have led RWAs to build more gates around colonies.” Elsewhere, it suggested that “Hiring a domestic help, especially a Nepalese or Bangladeshi, is fraught with dangers, say the police” (Bajpai 2007). An interview with Ravi Bajpai, an RWA beat writer for The Hindustan Times and the author of the previous quote, explained the source of the English media’s pro-middle class stance: “My job is to cover RWA concerns. We cater to that segment. We are a medium to put peoples’ grievances forward to the government.” A writer for The Times of India expressed a similar view: “The [weekly] supplement [catering to the middle class] is a link between communities and civic agencies. It is an outlet for expressing concerns and problems of a civic nature in neighborhoods . . . Government officials also read and respond to these articles.”
Police support for neighborhood securitization further fuels RWA rhetoric of outside intruders. As the Police Chief said during a large state-sponsored conference with RWA leaders in the city:

The attacks that took place in Ayodhya were organized by people staying in Delhi.¹⁹ There are many anti-social elements that stay in Delhi, its slums and unmonitored places. We have to watch out for suspicious people, terrorists, and criminals. This is the duty of RWAs. RWAs need to restrict and control this movement with security to remove anti-social elements and security risks. They must contact the police, monitor workers, build security mechanisms to achieve [this].

Thus, the rhetoric of slum illegality is mutually reinforced between the middle class public and the state, rendering discussion of slums as criminal, polluting spaces a routine part of neighborhood and public speech. A South Delhi RWA president justified his successful court petition to demolish a nearby slum on the same terms, saying the slum was inhabited:

by illegal immigrants and anti-social elements. They had big brawls with the cops and a month and a half back stole a cop’s gun . . . They also could have been involved in the terrorist issues. There were many Pakistanis and Bangladeshis there. I don’t believe that all Mohammedans are terrorists, but all terrorists are Mohammedans. Pakistan is the root of all problems. You can never trust Pakistan.²⁰

Unlike in Ravi Das Camp, we here see how perceived threats to the bourgeois inside are read beyond home and neighborhood, across the city (and sometimes nation) as a whole. The efforts of activist RWAs are thus not just about reclaiming local parks and neighborhoods, but the entire city, controlling the entry of workers and servants into both the residential colony and city at large.²¹ The anxiety about immigration hence operates as an extension of the boundary of the bourgeois inside (as represented by Figure 3) beyond the neighborhood to the borders of the city itself. Nuisance not only serves as a coherent discourse for uniting the diverse geographic imaginaries of transgression we have considered here, but also represents a vehicle through which broader efforts to restructure the land economy and visual landscape are advanced. That is, it is part of an effort “to make the spatial pattern both a reflection of and an active moment in the reproduction of the moral order” (Harvey 2003:40).

The Propriety of Property: Evaluating Nuisance
In both their internal meetings and in conversation with me, RWA members consistently raised concerns about slum sanitation and cleanliness, most often by arguing that behavior they consider distinctly private—for example, washing, bathing, drinking, and defecating—is unpleasant, morally degrading, and harmful when conducted in public. Seeing public land as the material foundation for urban order and an aesthetically gratifying life, the spatial imaginary RWA members expressed to me opposed the use of such land for subsistence purposes. As Pankaj Agarwal told me, “We want gardens in front of our houses, but there’s all kinds of filth there now. They [slum residents] wash clothes there. How can I enjoy my balcony?” Thus, while couched in the language of danger and insalubrity, RWA
members engaged in nuisance talk often betrayed more of a concern with property value and the quality of their private life than with environmental risk or crime. A wealthy South Delhi RWA member candidly conveyed this sentiment while giving me a tour of his house:

We have a back entrance also. It was on the side [of the house] with the jhuggis [huts], so until we had them removed we never even opened the door . . . Why would someone in a posh colony want to walk that way [near the slum]? This house is worth so much, and to just see these people squatting on free land! One wants to be reminded of the value of his property, not faced with encroachment and nuisance.

“Nuisance” here has a striking resemblance to colonial applications of the concept under British rule. As “the coercive arm of property rights” (Anderson 1992:17), the doctrine of nuisance “was closely wedded to a regime of private property . . . affording [property owners] a promise of protection against extrinsic interferences” (4). The law of nuisance also “played an important role in the appropriation and reconstitution of a specifically ‘public’ social space” (16), curtailing previous modes of “common access” by “introducing a fresh geopolitical ordering” that “permitted new entrepreneurial and middle class groups to sustain an attack on the customary rights of those with limited access to [and ownership of] productive resources” (17). That is, the colonial distinction between public and private—like in urban India today—had to be actively constructed and maintained so that, for example, “while it was perfectly legal to urinate in the open on one’s own property (if one had property), it was not legal alongside a public thoroughfare” (16).

Like these colonial applications of nuisance law, contemporary mobilizations of “nuisance” do not aim to eliminate public space. Rather, where they are successful, they enact a redefinition of public-ness, which also restructures the relationship between rights and property. For example, in responding to a batch of 63 cases filed mostly by RWAs demanding the removal of neighboring “nuisance-causing” slums, the Delhi High Court found it necessary to distinguish between different forms of “the public”:

The welfare of the residents of these [RWAs’] colonies is also in the realm of public interest which cannot be overlooked. After all, these residential colonies were developed first. The slums have been created afterwards which is the cause of nuisance and brooding [sic] ground of so many ills. The welfare, health, maintenance of law and order, safety and sanitation of these residents cannot be sacrificed . . . in the name of social justice to the slum dwellers.22

In its order against Ravi Das Camp in 2006, the court took this argument further, arguing that “the right of honest citizens . . . cannot be made subservient to the right of encroachers”, where the former were defined as those who “pay [a] handsome price for acquiring land” and the latter as “unscrupulous elements”.23 As the defense of property has been elevated as a “public interest” priority, the courts have accepted the RWA petitioners’ claim that property ownership is the requirement of substantive citizenship. Private property owners’ neighborhood specific efforts to extend the civic codes of the “bourgeois inside” into public space have hence been codified at the city level.
This realignment of the relationship between rights and property also indicates how nuisance signifies a theory of value as much as it indexes biological risk. When land is valued more as real estate than for its productivity (i.e., for its use value as a site for agriculture or industry), a higher portion of its exchange value accrues from its symbolic content. The attempt to sequester nuisances and other culturally coded signs of decay should be read, in this light, as a defense of this symbolic content. As a full-time RWA activist told me: “You have to create space for the rich. I don’t know what you think about the US, but we think capitalism isn’t a bad word. Rich people only spread goodness. Poor people spread dirt.” Arguing against the new Master Plan’s approach to densifying residential space, he continued:

It [densification] will squeeze out the rich making posh colonies too tight. They want to make the whole city for the poor. You need to encourage rich people to live here because they bring good things . . . If you make things too tight, they’ll go outside the city and it will crumble like a slum.

While his reference to things being “too tight” certainly refers to comfort and the use value of space, his claim also clarifies that the “good” of the rich depends on their separation from the poor—value accrues through the sequestration of degraded people, or as Gidwani and Reddy (2011:25) write, “Wasteful ‘natures’—bodies, spaces, things, and conducts—have to be territorialized for ordered ‘society’—the society of law that safeguards property and value—to be possible.”

While the stark binaries of wealth virtue and poverty degradation laid out above may appear extreme, the media and government have launched various public campaigns couched in similar terms, explicitly drawing upon middle class affective responses to poverty and the discourse of nuisance. The Delhi Government’s “Clean Delhi, Green Delhi” campaign, for example, is a city-wide public information drive aimed at instilling a sense of civic pride in the city’s cleanliness and appearance, primarily through aesthetic projects (e.g., roadside landscaping, park rejuvenation) that do little to address underlying sources of environmental stress. The “Clean Delhi, Green Delhi” phrase has been specifically used to criminalize public urination and littering and to fence and beautify road medians to remove space for begging. Under the guise of “cleaning up” Delhi in preparation for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, the DDA similarly banned approximately 300,000 vendors of street food, and the courts demanded the removal of all beggars from city roads.

As the Delhi Government’s advertisement shown in Figure 4 attests, the discourse of infestation not only circulates from the middle class to government, as discussed above, but becomes a part of official problematizations of urban poverty that are subsequently conveyed to the public at large. Because nuisance talk establishes a pattern of identifying its problem objects (the slum, the beggar, pollution) as sources, not products, of urban decay, the reader of the advertisement in Figure 4 is asked to inhabit a subject position with a particular bourgeois politics vis-à-vis the poor. By drawing upon a shared affective response (guilt, discomfort, abjection), the advertisement interpolates its subject, hailing the reader to respond on the aesthetic terms with which he is familiar. As the advertisement’s text brazenly reads: “For all you know, your alm may cause . . . Traffic Jams . . . Unemployment . . . Alcohol . . . Heroin . . . Robbery. Rape . . . Murder . . . Slums.” Here, the reader is positioned in an
automobile (a bourgeois, “inside” space) facing the onslaught of social ills listed in the text, his senses educated for later embodied encounters with poverty/disorder. The message is clear: the source of social decay is the urban poor, donations to whom (an instinct of the liberal bourgeoisie) encourage their illicit conduct and inhibit urban progress.

The government has advanced this message perhaps most aggressively in attributing high pollution levels in the Yamuna River to the presence of slums, despite the Delhi Water Board’s public acknowledgement that the main cause of pollution is the 22 open drains that carry untreated sewage from mostly middle class residential colonies across the city directly into the river. The Managing Director of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation thus writes:

A handful of self-styled environmentalists is stalling this idea [of modeling the Yamuna on the Thames in London and clearing all slum settlements from sight]. The result is rampant encroachments on the riverbed by jhuggis[,] which catch fire at regular intervals every summer, often burning alive a few people. Sewage and untreated industrial waste are let into the river without treatment (Sridharan 2009).

The Chief Minister similarly held “the slums responsible for the condition of the Yamuna”, even though the Central Pollution Control Board found “no improvement in the quality of water” following the removal in 2004–2005 of 40,000 jhuggis housing approximately 200,000 people from its banks. Here, the evidentiary basis for proving slums as the source of environmental stress and public nuisance is not a
techno-scientific or “mechanically objective” (Porter 1995) calculative rationality—nor, as I have argued elsewhere (Ghertner 2008), is it based on legal precedent or statutory law. Rather, the “fact” of slum pollution/illegality is known via a shared aesthetic disposition, acquired through subjective engagement with nuisance talk.

**Conclusion**

This paper has shown the different geographic imaginaries of transgression that both mobilize and are mobilized by Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs) in Delhi. These imaginaries operate across scales from the neighborhood to the nation (eg concerns with terrorism) and engage anxieties and aspirations traversing the material, symbolic, and sensate. Nuisance, I have shown here, has proven itself equally transmutable, taking on ecological, economic, and affective registers allowing for the easy identification of the abject “outside”. As it circulates beyond local settings, becoming incorporated in public service announcements, the mass media, commercial advertisements, judicial orders, and government proclamations, nuisance talk shapes the terms on which poverty and urban space can be described in the city as a whole. By designating the objects of urban disorder and calibrating individuals’ perceptions of that disorder to a broader program of social action (world-class city building), nuisance-as-aesthetic clarifies and confirms the unsightliness of poverty, disclosing its inherent structure to be as it appears: out of place, disturbing the natural order, illegal. “[E]thico-political duty has been internalized as spontaneous inclination”; that is, the mechanism of rule has shifted from the head to the heart, “from abstract decisions to bodily dispositions” (Eagleton 1990:114). Slums are known to be polluting and illegal because they look polluting and illegal; slum removal is a necessary process of urban improvement because it contributes to a more beautiful city.

By routing residents’ affective response to urban disorder through an aesthetic field defined in terms of the image of the world-class city, nuisance talk establishes its own rules of order, hierarchies of meaning, and legitimate opinions. Because nuisance talk makes certain types of disorder visible (eg pollution caused by open cooking) and not others (eg automobile exhaust), those entering into this aesthetic field embody certain visual dispositions—what Bourdieu (1998) calls “schemes of perception”—in order to gain membership in communities defined in terms of the field. In the case of the lower-middle class residents adjacent to Ravi Das Camp, it was an effort to claim middle class status. In the case of the elite RWA members we met, it was membership in a global community of “world-class” citizens, or a more general desire to “catch up” with the West. Slum residents, too, seek membership via this field, at times strategically adopting nuisance talk to construct themselves as potential world-class citizens—that is, worthy of government resettlement and property ownership and critical of “the nuisance of slums” (Ghertner 2011c). In this way, nuisance talk is not just a type of speech. It also actively shapes the social world by projecting aesthetic codes that are indexed to social status: as subjects desirous of a world-class future sensorily experience forms of disorder identifiable as “nuisances”, this aesthetic seems to tell them: “anyone in a world-class city would find this abhorrent”. In other words, nuisance talk posits, via a shared discourse and image-repertoire, a particular form of aesthetic engagement, allowing
concrete experiences of disorder to be linked to a broader social project of urban improvement.

As nuisance talk has become legitimated by the media’s adoption of “citizen concerns” and the Delhi Government’s efforts to “clean and green” Delhi, RWA federations and activists have effectively consolidated their de facto role as nuisance experts. The judiciary’s elevation of the defense of private property as a “public interest” priority, described in the previous section, has further codified the civic and aesthetic norms of the “bourgeois inside” as the basis for public space. This is not to say that all RWA members embrace an aggressive anti-slum stance, or that everyone in Delhi sees slums as “out of place”, but rather that a vanguard segment of this population has shaped public discourse by advocating a form of propertied citizenship and a vision of the urban future in which occupants of public land have no part. RWAs not only define the norm for urban aesthetics, but also now judge what constitutes an infraction of that norm. Without the need to scientifically assess resource degradation, pollution levels, or ecological health, bourgeois quality-of-life concerns and aesthetics have become the proxy for environmental quality in Delhi. As experts, then, activist RWAs’ goal of removing slums is construed as a legitimate social cause: the valiant and award-worthy27 effort of local civic activists struggling for a cleaner, greener city. The extent to which nuisance talk has realigned the official and popular conceptions of the public is demonstrated by the fact that removing slums and other visible blotches from the landscape is now considered a necessary and politically progressive step in city making.

For example, late in 2006, the Delhi Government, for the first time, began strict enforcement of child labor laws (Gentleman 2006). In a week of aggressive raids across the city, the police drove around in lorries collecting barefooted, raggedy children working in hotels, restaurants and other commercial establishments, shipping them out of the city, out of sight, and fining their employers. While celebrated by the Left as a human rights victory, this action might be better read as one in a series of acts of aesthetic disciplining, in line with the DDA ban on informal food vendors, the Supreme Court’s 2001 order banishing industry to the city’s peripheries, the criminalization and round-up of beggars, and the broader aesthetic reconstitution of the urban core. Nuisance, I have shown, provides the coherent aesthetic framework that unites these disparate actions as part of a rational process of urban improvement, despite their adverse livelihood implications for the numerically dominant urban poor.

Endnotes

1 “Middle class” is the term used consistently in the literature on Indian cities (cited above) to designate that class driving the embourgeoisement of Indian cities. Despite its conceptual ambiguity in the Indian context (Deshpande 2006), I retain usage of the term here to indicate my engagement with this literature. The association of the “middle class” (often in quotation marks) with a (moral, political) leadership role—that is, class as a form of political agency, not an income category—is consistent with historiographical research on the Indian nationalist movement (see Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar, 1983). I often add the label “property-owning” to “middle class” to specify that I mean property owners in state-planned colonies (ie not those in slums and unauthorized colonies). Elsewhere (Ghertner 2011a), I demonstrate that the state has formally empowered property owners (organized into RWAs) to shape the urban development agenda in Delhi. It is on the basis of their formal ownership of property, and their
activism to defend the privileges this ownership bestows, that I occasionally refer to RWAs as “bourgeois”. My intention here is not to suggest that “property ownership” is the only criterion of membership in “the middle class”, but rather to show the remarkable potency with which RWA representations of slums shape available modes of seeing and knowing urban space in Delhi. Literature on the construction of a bourgeois public sphere in colonial India, which I engage below, also centers the “middle class”, which it defines based on property ownership (see Chakrabarty 1992; Kaviraj 1998).

2 I observed RWA activities in a variety of spaces during this period, ranging from official meetings with the Chief Minister, to political strategizing sessions in members’ homes, to everyday street encounters with neighboring slum residents. I made initial contact with the general secretaries of Delhi’s two largest RWA federations and used “snowball sampling” to contact RWA members based on their involvement in slum-related matters. In total, I contacted more than 100 RWA members and had extended conversations with 50 individuals, many on multiple occasions. I also completed a survey of 25 RWA members, discussed in greater detail below. In addition, I interviewed four newspaper journalists on the “RWA beat”, as well as 12 government officials involved in the Delhi Government’s Bhagidari scheme, a participatory governance program that aims to incorporate RWAs into the local decision-making process.

3 This encounter took place in Hindi. Translations are my own. Words in italics indicate the integration of words derived from English into predominantly Hindi sentences. All conversations described after this section took place in English unless otherwise noted. While I interacted with RWA activists from diverse neighborhoods and class backgrounds during my research, most of my interlocutors lived in wealthier colonies dominated by English speakers. These were the people who could afford the additional time to mobilize against slums and who had the cultural capital to garner media and judicial recognition. I would not have encountered the neighbors of Ravi Das Camp had I not already been studying Ravi Das Camp.

4 In response to a Right to Information request that I filed in 2006, the Southwest Zone headquarters of the DDA wrote me that in all of Zone G, the zone in which Sant Ravi Das Camp is situated and that has a population of 1.4 million people (DDA nd:10), only 808 housing units were built between 1990 and 2006 for the economically weaker section (EWS), none before 1998. This is not enough to house even 0.5% of the population, whereas the Master Plan mandates that 25% of residential plots be for EWS and LIG categories.

5 This is what de Certeau (1989) has called the creation of “clean space”, the vision of the rational city he attributes to modernist planning.

6 Civil Writ Petition No 593 of 2002 in the Delhi High Court, order dated 8 March 2006.

7 Chakrabarty (1992:541) adds, “The street presented, as it were, a total confusion of the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ in the many different uses to which it was put”, leading colonizers and Western-educated nationalists alike to deplore the “absence of citizen-culture”, or a public sphere, in Indian cities.

8 For further discussion of the “plebianization” of politics in India and middle class backlash against it, see Hansen (1999).

9 As he writes, “in the sphere of everyday life, which lacked ceremonial value and would not qualify normally as a political realm, the really poor are left free to use the world as they please” (Kaviraj 1998:109). For a more political history of squatting in Calcutta, see Roy (2004).

10 This is what Roy (2004) describes as the effort to return Calcutta to the “gentleman’s city” it once was. Also see Baviskar (2003), Fernandes (2004) and Anjaria (2006).

11 Thus, while most analyses of urban fortification/securitization read this act as a primarily defensive effort to protect the self from the risk of the other (Caldeira 2001; Low 2001), I am suggesting that it can also be an expansionary endeavor: by withdrawing private land uses from public, such practices also seek to define public spaces as territory in which private life (eg washing, bathing, cooking) should be banned.

12 These data were collected using a mail-in survey sent out to 85 randomly selected RWA members (response rate of 29%) using a database provided by the Bhagidari Cell of the Chief Minister’s Office. I made initial contact over the phone and sent surveys to those who expressed a willingness to participate. The data I present here indicate responses from.
a part of the survey in which I asked respondents to evaluate the relative importance of various civic grievances on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was “not important at all”, 2 was “of minor importance”, 3 was “somewhat important”, 4 was “very important”, and 5 was “most important”.

13 Interview date: 24 April 2006.
14 Interview date: 20 April 2006.
15 Between 1998 and 2006 in Delhi, all categories of violent crime decreased in incidence, with the exception of rape, the occurrence of which increased from 441 to 623 cases, and kidnapping for ransom (25 to 32). The number of murders fell from 649 to 476, robbery from 823 to 541, rioting from 195 to 50. Property crimes fell even more drastically, with burglary dropping from 3764 to 1101. Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No 942, dated 7 March 2007. According to the Chief of Police, the increasing incidence of rape is likely due to “an increase in reporting”. Most cases of rape, he said, were “perpetrated by members of the victim’s family, or a person known to the victim”. “Police chief says crime in India’s capital under control”, AP Worldstream, 6 January 2006.
16 “Unsafe city—3 cases a day in “rape Capital,” The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 1 May 2008.
17 Interview with Mr Ravi Bajpai, 6 November 2006.
18 Interview with Ms Uttara Rajinder, 15 November 2006.
19 Ayodhya is the former site of the Babri Mosque, which was destroyed by Hindu nationalists in December 1992. This act and the controversy surrounding it fueled a rise in communal politics that led to rioting in numerous cities across India. While the demolition of the mosque was carried out by Hindu activists, the Police Chief seems to be making reference to Muslim extremists in this quote.
21 This aligns with Deshpande’s observation that with the advent of the reform era in the early 1990s, the middle class began to claim not just that it represents the ideal nation—what he calls the “proxy” citizen, an idealized product of state developmentalism seen as carrying the nationalist project forward into the postcolonial era—but “rather that it is itself the nation” (2003:150).
22 Civil Writ Petition No 4215 of 1995 in the Delhi High Court, emphasis added.
23 Civil Writ Petition No 593 of 2002 in the Delhi High Court, order dated 8 March 2006. While Chaterjee’s (2004) distinction between “civil society” and “political society” points to this division, there is a tendency in the literature to treat this arrangement as pre-given (in Chatterjee’s case, perhaps as a holdover from colonial divisions between elite and subaltern politics) or as the inevitable result of economic liberalization. In contrast with this view, RWA activism in Delhi shows how this separation is an ongoing political process.
24 For example, consider the primarily aesthetic function of the 34 million rupee Green Delhi Action Plan, which focuses on roadside landscaping, litter removal, and strategic tree planting without attention to broader sources of resource degradation or deforestation. “Delhi is gearing up for a new green revolution,” The Hindu, New Delhi, 6 July 2008. For further discussion of the role of environmental discourse in facilitating gentrification in Delhi, see Ghertner (2011b).
25 “Yamuna pollution issue: Delhi High Court summons top officials,” The Hindustan Times, New Delhi, 15 February 2007.
26 “CM concern for green lung, seeks expert panel,” The Times of India, New Delhi, 14 May 2009 and note 25.
27 The Delhi Government’s Bhagidari scheme issues annual awards for the best RWAs, which are widely celebrated in the media. The top award in 2006 went to an RWA that cleared two slums in its colony.

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