The FuturArc Interview

Rahul Srivastava and Matias Echanove
Founders of urbz

By **Heather Banerd**

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Self-described urbanologists **Rahul Srivastava** and **Matias Echanove** are the founders of urbz, a global design collective with chapters in Mumbai, Goa, São Paolo, Bogotá, Geneva and Seoul, and members in many more cities around the world. The duo bring multidisciplinary backgrounds to their research and practice—Srivastava studied social and urban anthropology in Mumbai, Delhi and Cambridge, while Echanove began in economics and government at London School of Economics before studying urban planning at Columbia University, and urban information systems at the University of Tokyo. They began working together 10 years ago through a collaboration with a local committee in Dharavi, Mumbai, where they were asked to create an alternative narrative for a redevelopment proposal. Since then, they have honed their methods through their practice in Dharavi, and applied it in numerous cities around the world through the work of urbz. They are also prolific writers on a range of urban topics and have exhibited in numerous institutions from the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) to the World Bank.

HB: The scope of work you undertake is really wide-ranging, from affordable housing and neighbourhood plans to studies, exhibitions and publications. How do you determine which projects to undertake? Is there a specific goal or objective behind your work?

ME: We are interested in neighbourhoods—how they grow, how they are shaped internally by the people living in them, and externally by everything from economic activities to history. You need to understand the dynamics at work—cultural dynamics, community dynamics, caste in the case of India—and the activities taking place before you can begin to work in a place. Dharavi has always been a fascinating place, and we learn a lot through working here. It's a place that lets you see what happens when there is no planning, no architects and no engineers. The space is entirely shaped around communities and activities, and so we developed an approach based on our experience in Mumbai working with local actors and communities. In our practice, we work at different scales, for example, we can look at how to marginally improve people's lives by designing the very small details of a house like staircases, stalls for vendors, and so on. But at the same time, we can do architectural projects, and also be involved with neighbourhood plans, all simultaneously. Architecture is one entry point that we find very exciting, but the scale and entry point don't matter as long as we can find ways to work in the local economy, with local actors.

RS: Our activities are also framed by research projects we choose to do, so we're keeping track of what is happening around us in terms of economics, politics, etc., so that we are able to plug into ongoing events in a timely manner. This way, our practical work feeds into our academic work and vice versa. Although we both have academic backgrounds, and work with quite a lot of academic institutions, we don't consider ourselves academics. While we are interested in the theory and discourse around urbanism—and it is important for us to keep on writing and engaging with theory—we like to be engaged in practice and remain free in our expression. So we are happy to be outside academia.

HB: You initially began practising in Mumbai, specifically Dharavi, but have since expanded to an office in Goa, and working on projects around the world. How does your approach differ across such diverse contexts?

RS: urbz is a collective rather than a single practice. We have kept our office in Mumbai extremely small and light, but what we do have is a very wide network. We have a huge circulation of volunteers from all over the world who come and spend time with us, learn from us, just as we are learning from Dharavi, and then some of them go back to wherever they come from and start an urbz chapter. So we have urbz Bogotá, or urbz Seoul, Toronto, Montreal, Geneva. It's not a territorial expansion, but rather a multiplication of the methodology, which people become a part of as they join our network. So each chapter is an expansion of the network. We don't control what happens in the urbz based in Bogotá or São Paolo—it's an initiative taken by the team there. Our approach is actually shared by so many people, it is not something we invented, and associating themselves with the urbz collective makes it easier for them to start their own activities.

ME: An important aspect of creating and maintaining this network is that people actually move from one place to the other. When we start working in a specific locality, we like to do a week-long workshop, where people come from all different chapters to participate. As they are familiar with the method and approach, they can plug in super easily and each brings their own experiences to the table. Then sometimes, for example, the Bogotá team comes here for a few weeks; sometimes we go there. So that's also the way the network of the collective is kept alive. Our practice in Dharavi is like an anchor, where people become part of the network and then go back to their home city and work on it. Recently, many of us went to Geneva for a workshop, from Mumbai, Seoul, Montreal and Berlin.

1 Installation at the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum, Mumbai 2017. Visitors were asked to pin a thread connecting their native village to their neighbourhood in Mumbai. These connected maps show the dense network of connections that exists between Indian cities and villages. **2** Workshop with an indigenous community in the outskirts of Bogotá on the improvement of their settlement. **3** urbz is working with local governments in South Korea to come up with strategies for the economic and urban development of rural localities, such as the island of Ulleungdo, on the East Sea between Korea and Japan.
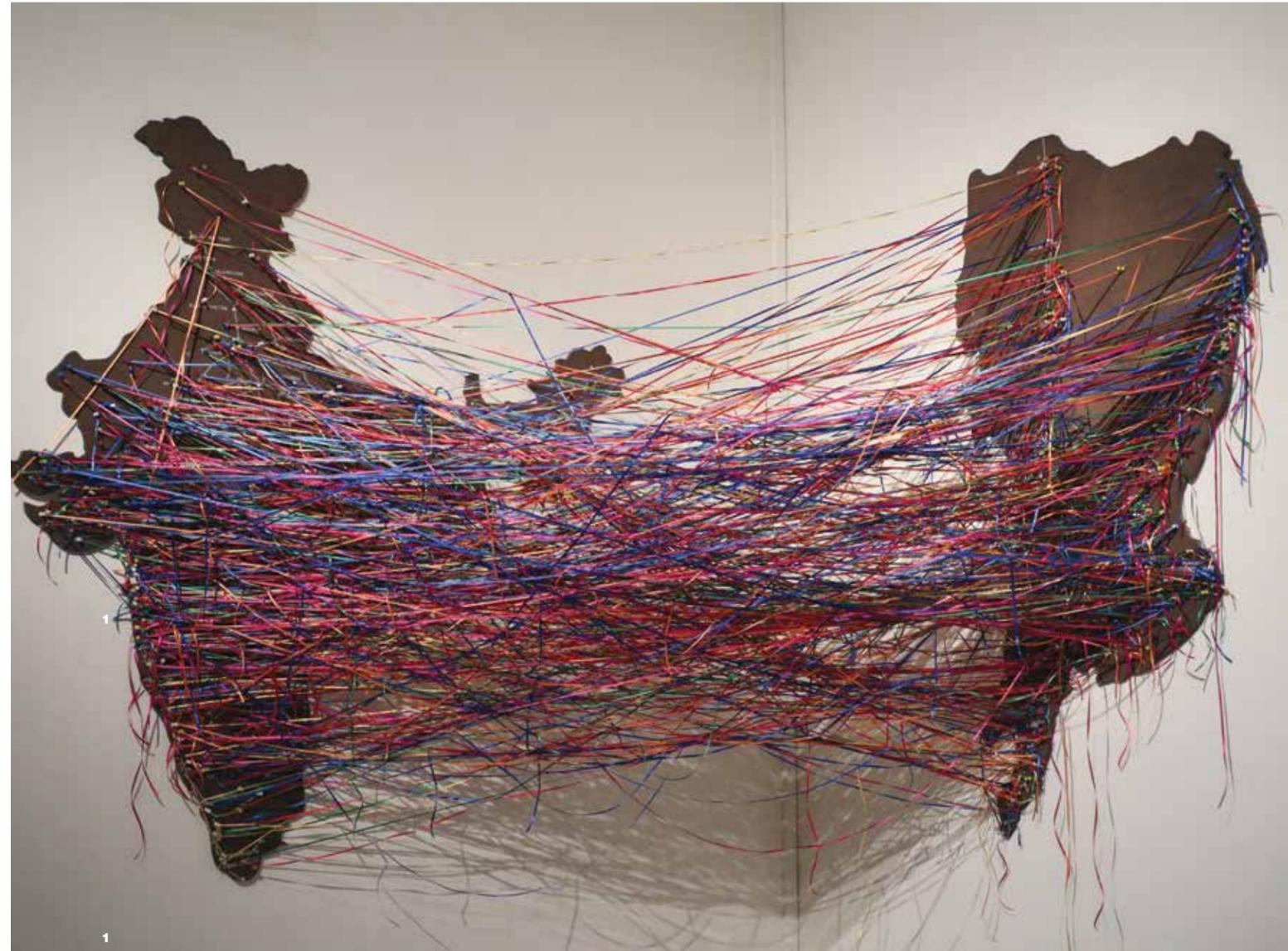
4 Ideal house for Dharavi designed by a builder who lives and work in Dharavi, Mumbai. This was part of a project that was exhibited at the MAXXI in Rome, Spring House in Amsterdam and the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum in Mumbai.   5 Fictional streetscape showing what incremental development would look like in Dharavi, Mumbai, if local builders were allowed to construct their dream homes.   6 urbz was mandated to organise participatory workshops with stakeholders in an industrial park in Geneva, Switzerland. We came up with innovative ideas for the programme of the ecoPark, which are now integrated into the master plan.

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RS: Geneva is a special office because Matias has his own personal connections there, while activities in Goa emerged because I happen to live half my time here. Many of our projects will emerge because people will ask us questions about what we are doing, and through our responses, we start developing dialogues and practices. In Goa, there has been a substantial increase in the slum population, and so naturally people are concerned, and they come to urbz to help them understand why this is happening. We have just begun a research and documentation process of this. At the same time, our Goa office is developing as our media space, where a lot of our knowledge gets processed into films, drawings and exhibition formats.

ME: In Geneva, we've been quite lucky to be able to work with the government. At the time we started there, about two years back, there was a shift in the urban planning process and participation of residents became compulsory, so they were looking for help in that realm. There was a lot of discussion about participation but very little real practice. Then, most participatory practices that existed before in Geneva—and still in many cities around the world—are mostly round-table with sticky notes. We completely exploded that format. Our participatory process is much more about creativity: bringing people from the neighbourhood together with people from outside and challenging what we know, bringing in new ideas, and trying to innovate in the process. In Geneva, these kinds of projects come as mandates from the government, and in Seoul, there is also a favourable institutional context, but it is not something we are quite able to do in Mumbai, where we are not able to collaborate so closely with the municipality. So it's interesting for us to see that the practice that we've developed over here can function very well within a more institutional context—it doesn't have to be always tactical, informal, but can also be very much formalised and integrated into existing practices.

HB: You've studied and written about the parallels between Dharavi and Tokyo's mixed-use neighbourhoods that developed organically following World War Two. Why do you think these areas have turned out so differently while following similar methods of development? Can these neighbourhoods be seen as models for high-density urbanism?
ME: Rather than seeing Dharavi as a model of high-density urbanism, we see it as somewhere where the processes at work are very obvious. These processes are also at work in many other places, which are now considered to be informal, or slums, though they may not be as clear. From these, we observe that mixed-use, high-density, low-rise neighbourhoods do exist, and do function in different contexts, so there is no reason why incremental development cannot be part of what creates successful neighbourhoods; on the contrary, there's a lot we can learn from those kinds of processes. The example of Tokyo is interesting because we see entire districts, which developed incrementally, and are now part of a modern city. Why does it work in one context and not in others? It's really important to understand that the government has a big role to play in accepting, or not, certain forms or certain processes. In the case of post-war Japan there was a huge tolerance for emerging, mixed-use type of neighbourhoods. And this is not the case in Mumbai, where they are seen as a problem, or in China, where urban villages are being redeveloped. We want to make sure that the value that these kinds of neighbourhoods and urban forms bring to the city is recognised. By comparing these to parts of Tokyo we are simply saying that by changing your perspective, by understanding and recognising the language of urbanism in a deeper way, you will be able to produce a template for modern urban habitats, which is far more varied and far more diverse.

HB: How do you think cities can act on this, and encourage more diverse development?
ME: We feel that really starting to understand the use that people are already making of spaces is really important. In some cases it's quite obvious because those uses are already expressed clearly, and in some cases it's something that needs to be discovered because it's not so easily visible. We always like to give the example of Steve Jobs' start-up in a garage, which is basically an illegal use of residential space, yet this creative use of underused spaces is exactly what we should be looking at when we're designing, when we're planning. So drawing from the use, from existing activity, is for us the core of the approach. The best way of doing this is first of all, to observe but also to let people express themselves, in the participatory process. Participation for us is not just some kind of moral of political imperative—it can actually help us design better. It can also highlight flaws in existing planning processes. In one of the projects we are doing now in Geneva, a plan is emerging based on the way the residents want to use the neighbourhood that is complicated to implement using existing planning frameworks and tools. This has led to very interesting interactions with the municipality and the state, who are quite open to thinking about how they need to reform or work around the way they have been planning so far.
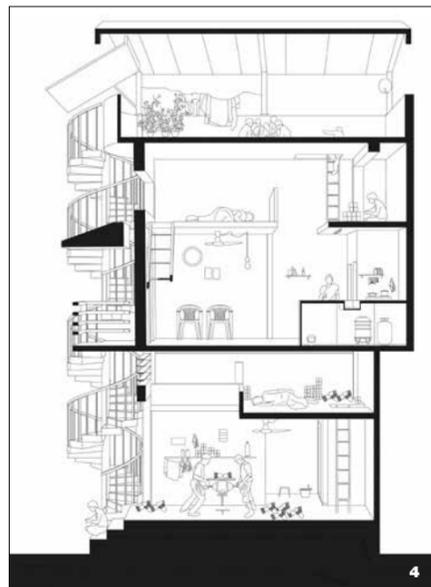
RS: I also think we need to have new models of financial investment in urban development. Right now, there is certain abstract, very generalised notion about what urban development should be, based on very set criteria that requires massive financial investments. Why is it that quick returns on investment are the foundation for creating cities? For example, the Smart Cities project in India is shaped so much by the idea of the ability of a smart city to attract investment, so obviously it means only certain kinds of urban planning projects will take shape. The questions of what it means for the local residents, for goals of sustainability and environment, for local governance—all these get pushed away.

ME: A term we coined recently to express this is "excel sheet urbanism"—planning based on regulatory constraints and conventional financial models, where development is focused on mono-functional blocks, because this is what investors understand. Nobody wants to go to the trouble of understanding how to finance and insure plans for low-rise, high-density, mixed-use development. It's perceived as too complicated, but we don't think it is. The state can be an important actor in financing this kind of development, or there are alternative models such as crowdfunding or cooperative housing that bring much more flexibility to financing projects. This makes us very hopeful.

RS: Ultimately the way we work in urbz, as urban planners, anthropologists, people with training in economics, architecture and design coming together is a recognition that these various dimensions have to be accurately represented when we talk about urban planning. It cannot only be about built form, but also financial management, land use and communities. So in our practice, we're willing to go as far into these dimensions as the project takes us.

HB: How do you see urbz evolving in the future? Do you have specific goals you want to achieve?
ME: We want to consolidate the collective, especially in terms of exchange of experience and exchange of methods, to see what works and what doesn't work in different contexts and why. We'd also like to work on developing the urbz website into an effective media platform, communicating our approach, method and how this method can be applied in different contexts—both among ourselves and with the public at large. We'd be very happy to have more collaboration with governments, or developers, who see the value that these types of processes can add to what they are already doing. More and more governments understand that their approach needs to change, and they are looking for models. So for us, the potential of working in different cities and being able to put our experience into practice in different contexts is very exciting for us.