The Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) recently cleared another plan to build 26 skyscrapers to house slum dwellers from Malad and Parel. But URBZ, a group of urban planners, feels vertical rehabilitation is not the best solution. Through their Homegrown Cities Project (HCP), the group as now teamed up with local contractors to build sustainable settlements and set up a co-operative housing society encompassing what is officially deemed a slum area.

IOEENA HALIM finds out more about their pilot project in Bhandup, and their other plans...
Building for the community, by the community

SIXTY per cent of Mumbai’s population lives in slums,” says Rahul Srivastava, co-founder, URBZ. “But that is not necessarily a bad thing. These informal settlements offer a great solution to Mumbai’s spatial concerns. We tend to define urbanism in a very narrow manner,” the anthropologist points out.

According to the state Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), slumdwellers live in colonies simply because there is no alternative. The government authority’s solution is conventional, for the lack of a better word: redevelopment. But as Srivastava points out, “growing vertically may not always be the answer.” So what’s the alternative?

An alternative solution

In 2008, realising the bias surrounding the slum narrative, Srivastava, Geeta Mehta and Matthias Echanove teamed up to set up URBZ – a group of urban planners, architects, designers, and anthropologists, who organise workshops, develop web content and facilitate hands-on research projects.

And after years of working with local contractors across the city, advising them about architectural design or construction materials whenever help was required, the team at URBZ has now decided to go a step further with the Homegrown Cities Project. Ironically, a Maharashtra Housing & Area Development Authority (MHADA) and World Bank scheme, which sold affordable, serviced plots to low-income households in the late 80s, serves as their inspiration.

Crowdfunding

The pilot for URBZ’s long-term mission is going to be is Bhandup. Joining forces with social entrepreneur Aaron Pereira, the team has already received a great amount of financial help through crowd-funding. “The hunt is on for the perfect plot. We’ve already surveyed a few houses where the current residents are leaving, so it shouldn’t take us much longer to shortlist the ideal one. However, we don’t expect to begin work on the house before November. Construction is tricky in such zones, where land cannot be owned. Buying and selling is tricky as well and we don’t want to find ourselves embroiled in something illegal. We have a team of volunteers who are helping us work through the legalities,” Echanove tells us candidly during our chat at the URBZ office in Dharavi.

Who needs a highrise?

But isn’t it practical to build a high-rise tower when it comes to accommodating residents of a slum? The URBZ team thinks not. Rather than razing existing structures and erecting a new building, the project aims to sustain the existing mo. Their intention is to slowly renovate or rebuild all the houses in the neighbourhood and eventually help set up the cooperative housing society.

“We want to support the community’s good practices and improve construction. It is imperative that we recognise that local construction is not equivalent to construction. It doesn’t always have to be about ‘fixing it,’” says Echanove. “There are several homegrown neighbourhoods, including Dharavi Koliwada, Shivaji Nagar, and Saki Naka. These are all very efficiently built. They aren’t merely residential, also include shops and small businesses. Demolishing these shanties would mean destroying local economy. We’re not being romantic about it and saying there is no problem, but there is certainly no point in flattening a settlement blindly destroying what works well for the community,” adds the urban planner. A PhD candidate at the University of the People.
Power to the people

So, instead of commissioning an architect to plan a ‘solution’ for slum dwellers, HC goes to them and relies mainly on the expertise of local contractors. "If I were to do this for others, I'd start by commissioning an architect who would ask about smaller developments," says Irfan Divate, who has been working on the URBZ team in Byculla for 15 years. "But I agree that the local contractors are always very open to learning. What we aim for is to work closely with the contractors." Echanove, a partner at Echanove, adds: "The contractors are always very open to learning. We aim for a more collaborative approach." In some cases, Echanove continues, "Yes, there is a huge scope for collaboration and mutual learning."}

Water systems might be one of the major problems in informal settlements, but redoing the underground system isn't very difficult at all. There is absolutely no need to break down the slums to rejig the pipelines, but this is often used as an excuse to redevelop slum lands.

Matias Echanove
Co-founder of URBZ

To get work on 60-70 houses a year, the URBZ scheme has affected my business. People are worried about the uncertainty of the new housing and the uncertain rental rates. People extend their houses to 225 square feet. The HC team sometimes adds a floor to 450 square feet by adding a floor. People don't want to spend their savings on constructing a new house, says Echanove.

And as Divate notes, most slum-dwellers aren't happy about being rehabilitated to a tall tower in a poorly constructed building at all. "Living in a chawri house means you can extend your house anytime you want. People extend their houses to 225 square feet. The HC team sometimes adds a floor to 450 square feet by adding a floor. You can't do that to your flat, can you?" laughs Divate. Besides, a chawri gives you the feeling of a community. This way, we meet each other and are always there when the other needs help," he adds. According to Srivastava, HC is also about building democratically. While URBZ's scheme offers no control over the redevelopment of the area, the idea here is to involve the community members in every possible aspect. "That's the basic premise of URBZ too. We are all about user-generated cities and our aim is to highlight the community's ability to build perfectly sustainable neighbourhoods despite the government's negligence," he says.

Replicating the democratic model

Provided the pilot project achieves a certain amount of success, URBZ would like to initiate similar projects in other neighbourhoods. "We'd like to showcase this as an alternative to the SRA schemes," says Echanove, adding that they only attempt at pitching the idea to government officials and that they don't get the attention they deserve. "But if we can build a good place to begin, we can replicate it. This is a good example of how residents have built their own little neighbourhood. We hope we can take the idea further in the future," he says.

Srivastava summed up their objectives best when he concludes, "We're not argumentative activists but we're also not armchair observers."