THE VILLAGE INSIDE

Followed By

THE SLUM OUTSIDE

Matias Echanove & Rahul Srivastava

urbz

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

INDEX

The Village Inside

The Slum Outside

THE VILLAGE INSIDE

Introduction

One of Gandhi's main obsessions was the idea of the self-sufficient village—one that would service most of its inhabitants' needs and act as an independent republic of its own. The idealization of the small-scale, self-sustaining and communitarian village was a characteristic reaction to the global emergence of large-scale, bustling industrial cities and trading centers that had changed the way the world organized itself from the nineteenth century onwards. The city had become a larger-than-life figure perceived to be simultaneously mechanistic and out of control, environmentally destructive and socially alienating, while the village was posited as a human-scale alternative in tune with Indian traditions, morality and spirituality.

As brilliantly argued by political psychologist Ashis Nandy, the archetype of a Gandhian village could not have emerged anywhere else than in the unsettled mind of an urbanite. Gandhi, a city boy by all accounts, produced most of his village visions during his stay in South Africa and later from his colonial Bombay home. This image, according to Nandy, was as much the product of Gandhi's late explorations of rural India as the fruit of a deep introspection, which slowly brought to surface the ideal vision of a village in him—as in every Indian.

Gandhi's village, however, cannot be reduced to romantic folklore or agrarian utopia. It was based on the principles of industriousness and autonomy, and located the artisan—symbolized by the famous cloth spinning wheel—at the center of its organization. It represented freedom from top-down political control and economic dependency. Local management of natural resources, including food production, and an insistence on self-made homes, were hallmarks of the Gandhian village. Gandhi believed that any construction had to be built with material solicited from an area of approximately five miles radius around the site (Henderson 2002, 94).

Ivan Illich and other radical critics of the construction industry echoed this in the 1970s. Illich argued that building regulations and the real estate industry took away the ability of people to build their own homes (Illich 1973). Under the guise of defending collective and general interest, construction law has in effect proscribed self-made houses and habitats. Moreover, public spending has been invested into the edification of new towns and housing complexes instead of helping people to build

and maintain their own abodes. These new industrial homes, built according to preset norms, are unaffordable to the poor, resulting in the vicious housing crisis that all modern cities are experiencing today—a crisis manufactured to serve the interest of an industry that far from providing housing to the needy, produces more misery and homelessness. Gandhi responded to the same industrial-urban logic at work in colonial India.

However, as compelling and influential as Gandhi's defense of the Indian village may have been, it was not enough to contain the massive and continuous rural exodus that the country has been experiencing ever since independence. For many, the transition from the village to the city was, and continues to be, experienced as a liberation from social hierarchies and servitude. Indeed, a major voice opposing Gandhi was that of Dr. Ambedkar, a social reformer, ideologue and revered Dalit leader (from the ex- untouchable community), famous for being the architect of the Indian constitution. While Gandhi was exhorting Indians to go back to the villages, Dr. Ambedkar was urging Dalits to move to the cities, where they could liberate themselves from a backward milieu characterized by caste-based exploitation, poverty and illiteracy. One could argue that both Gandhi and Ambedkar's visions were ultimately fulfilled and perverted in India's shadow cities.

Gandhi's idealization of the village was surely problematic to start with. He saw it as an objective reality that could be conceptually posited as a counterpoint to the city. This oppositional logic was typical of Gandhi's time—marked by extreme political ideologies—and it remains one of the most widespread misconceptions about urbanization today. The era of industrial urbanization has typically been represented as a shifting point, when the split between cities and villages became wider and irreversible.This polarization was however more notional than real. Gandhi's emphasis on the village as the locus of economic activity and social progress was as a response to Western faith in industrialization and urbanization; but this response became susceptible to other kinds of dogma and ideologies.

After independence, the Indian government adopted a Gandhian line and largely ignored urban development. Development strategies focused instead on rural areas, where real India was said to reside. Incentives and support were given to cottage and small-scale industries in rural areas. Yet the movement of citizens from the countryside to the city continued. For several decades, this movement did not really worry the government, given that total numbers of people in rural India remained high. The government therefore persisted with its rural bias.

Meanwhile, a version of the village was actually being recreated inside India's sprawling cities. Rural-urban migrants were resurrecting old community ties, arts and crafts in a new form (Nandy 1998, 6). In quest for livelihood, water and freedom from feudal ties, rural migrants came in millions to the cities and brought with them their skills, talents and evolving traditions. Hamlets, villages and settlements mushroomed in and around cities, providing ever-cheaper labor, goods and services to urban residents. These settlements were never seen as legitimate since they were not planned and could not be property audited. Integrating the city in their own

terms, the needs of these emerging settlements were largely disregarded, leading to their marginalization.

Their illegitimacy, though, is as much a result of conceptual fallacies as anything else—a fallacy that insists on understanding the world of habitats in terms of watertight compartments and believes that villages and cities belong to different planets. In truth, cities and villages have always been much more integrated and mutually dependent than Gandhi acknowledged. Jane Jacobs's concept of a city-region recognizes that agricultural villages are essentially part of the urban economy they serve (Jacobs 1969, 17). Inversely, the village has always existed within the city's ethos, fabric and practices.

Gandhi's dream of a dominant countryside was never realized; instead, it was happening, some would say in a nightmarish way, in the dirty, polluted and promiscuous city. Rural migrants were building thousand of industrious shacks with locally available materials wherever they could find space: marshland, junkyards, along railway tracks, on the pavements. Incrementally developing and consolidating, self-reliant and defiant, slums flourished to the point that they are now said to be home to more than half the population of Mumbai and many other cities.

Unfortunately, the Indian government never saw slums as striving urban villages, bravely self-developing and worthy of support. Quite on the contrary, to this day they are perceived as shameful marks of underdevelopment, irreconcilable with the country's aspiration to become a modern and civilized nation. While slum dwellers are dismissed as squatters, slums are perceived as natural enemies of city planning and good governance.

Photograph - urbz

Thus, the only possible official response to slums seems to be repression, through erasure or willful indifference.

For instance, Dharavi in Mumbai, mistakenly known as the largest slum in Asia, has never been properly retrofitted with water pipes, sewage systems and electrical infrastructure, nor does the municipality treat it as a legitimate part of the city. Instead, its residents and businesses have had their sheltering and livelihoods threatened by "imminent" redevelopment projects for decades.

Million Dharavis

Planners and politicians have used Dharavi's unplanned, messy, indeed slummy appearance to justify its destruction. Dharavi is typically pictured as a backward locality, an urban parasite preventing Mumbai from becoming a "world-class city." However, as we argued in a recently published response to the movie Slumdog Millionaire, reality stands in sharp contrast to the way slums are usually represented:

> Its depiction as a slum does little justice to the reality of Dharavi. Well over a million "eyes on the street," to use Jane Jacobs's phrase, keep Dharavi perhaps safer than most American cities. Yet, its extreme population density doesn't translate into oppressiveness. The crowd is efficiently absorbed by the thousands of tiny streets branching off bustling commercial arteries. In addition, you won't be chased by beggars or see hopeless people loitering—Dharavi is probably the most active and lively part of an incredibly industrious city. People have learned to respond in creative ways to the indifference of the state—including having set up a highly functional recycling industry that serves the whole city. (Echanove and Srivastava 2009)

Even more remarkably, visitors have observed that many aspects of Dharavi are reminiscent of European old town and villages, with their labyrinthine and narrow streets, low-rise and high-density structures, mixed-use spatial arrangements, small shops on the ground floor and living spaces on the upper floors, workshops and lively street activity where pedestrian traffic dominates any other mode of transportation. This is no coincidence.
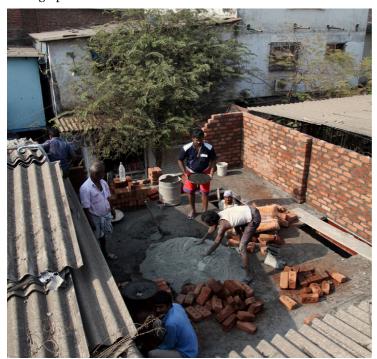
Many neighborhoods around the world share a similar history of incremental development. These are the parts of the city which, though never planned or designed, have acquired a strong identity over time, marked by the evolution and mutation of micro economic and cultural practices. These practices of daily life, to paraphrase Michel de Certeau, shape space and produce context. Space becomes the malleable receptacle of local practices. As practices shape the space they inhabit, they increase its use value. Space becomes not only supportive of, but also conducive to certain uses and practices. This process is at work in these neighborhoods, with different levels of intensity and various degrees of autonomy from the larger

context. The relationship between space and practices produces its own temporality, connecting a familiar past with a not so distant future.

Incrementally developing neighborhoods can also fall into history, memory or nostalgia when the built environment is artificially preserved long after it ceases to fulfill any function. But more often than not, they evolve in creative ways and acquire new meanings over time, just like SoHo, New York, where galleries, high fashion, luxury retail and stylish lofts have replaced artist studios and squats, which themselves had replaced warehouses and factories. In Dharavi, the spectacle of a neighborhood transforming itself in fast-forward mode captivates the attention of researchers, reporters and audiences around the world.

Dharavi is constantly in formation from the day its first inhabitants, who were nomadic fishing tribes, settled perhaps three centuries ago on this auspicious creek at the confluence of the Mithi tributary and the Arabian Sea. In the early twentieth century came Muslim and Tamilian artisans, who set up tanneries to produce leather goods for Bombay's expanding consumer market in the early twentieth century. As the city grew, migrants came from all over India, bringing with them their arts and trades. They have established themselves, improvised, struggled, made roots, built up and moved on. Dharavi is today a major trading hub, central to Mumbai's economy, exporting goods to all over the country and beyond.

Photograph - urbz

The Genesis of Cities

Habitats such as Dharavi have been generated in response to basic human needs for sheltering and subsistence. According to Jane Jacobs, the foundational principles of urban development are intimately linked to certain forms of livelihood, such as hunting-gathering, trading, artisanal production and its scaled-up versions. Historically, the political kingdom was a unit that involved a relatively smaller proportion of its inhabitants living in close proximity to each other - what we would refer to today as urbanized settlements. This population was intertwined in an economy that serviced the ruling establishment and acted as nodes in larger networks of exchange of goods and services. Anthropologists like Anthony Leeds see them as urban systems that encompassed vast territories of land dotted with villages, fields and inhabited forests, all of which were part of the kingdom. They were connected to each other through taxation, interdependence of food, security, and other economic needs.[1]

All kinds of inhabited space, and in particular agricultural land and forests were regulated and controlled. The act of ruling included the process of administering surveys of populations, controlling their movements, involving people in acts of construction as cheap labor and shaping their livelihoods through economic regulation.[2] At the same time, since most people lived outside urbanized centers, the physical aspect of their habitat was not regulated. The ruling administration was mostly concerned with taxation and political security. As a result, villages and townships improvised built-forms in response to their means and activities, often in collective ways, using locally available skills and technologies.

The industrial revolution is supposed to have brought in a huge disjuncture in contemporary organization of social life and this is largely represented in terms of a change from rural to urban, with a vast majority of the population physically moving from rural to urban areas. This move reflected a massive crisis of administration in the nineteenth century and saw the evolution of new modes of administration and control of the rural migrants. Modern urban planning emerged as a response to this need, and the ideal of the planned city - to be eventually emulated by everyone - became some kind of a global norm.

This ideal posited itself as a counterpoint to rural life. Urban planning was defined along the functional lines dictated by industrialization and the cultural values of modernization. Hardly a scaled up version of the mixed use and improvised village, the master planned city strictly zoned and structured around well-defined activities. It left little space for the grey zones between public and private, and living and working that characterizes unplanned habitats.

---

1. Anthony Leeds, Cities, Classes and the Social Order, Roger Sanjek Publications, 1994
2. James Scott, Seeing Like the State, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998

The artisanal home, a distinctive aspect of village life, was seen as problematic. Home-based manufacture and traditional skills were seen to be outmoded with the factory becoming the legitimate site of production. Trade of goods and services had to be regulated. The presence of a bazaar-based exchange that floated through the economy and was an intrinsic part of village's exchange networks had to be controlled. The segregation of places of residence, places of work, of leisure and markets were presented as hallmarks of contemporary urban life, necessary for the efficient functioning of cities with their large populations. Failure to control spatial use was seen as a failure of urbanization and planning.

Urban-Rural

The government, international organizations, and the real estate industry seem unable to respond to the hundred of thousands of improvised settlements in Indian cities in any other way than clearance and redevelopment. This happens in spite of the fact that the construction of mass housing and factories has never been able to slow down the growth of urban slums. It also disregards the operational logic of many slums where space is used in a much more flexible way, with functions such as living and working constantly overlapping. Even the most enlightened urban plan trying to bring these functions closer together, at most succeeds in reorganizing them in ingenious way, but is strictly unable to merge them operationally. From a planning perspective, any ambiguity in the way space is used is perceived as a potential threat.

The unwillingness to recognize self-developing neighborhoods as legitimate alternatives can partly be attributed to a colonial habit of organizing and controlling space, which has evolved into all kinds of planning directives and urban designs. By and large, heroic planning attempts have failed in post-independence Indian cities, which remain desperately—some would say wonderfully—chaotic at all levels. One space that it succeeded in colonizing completely, however, is the space of imagination. The city is perceived as being modern, high-rise and motorized (think New York, Singapore and Shanghai), or slummy, messy and backward. There is no conceptual in-between for a city that is incrementally developing, mixed-use, efficient and convivial.

Kisho Kurokawa, a much-revered Japanese architect and proponent of the Metabolist movement, locates this conceptual void in Western conceptions of urban order. According to him:

> Western culture rests on innumerable binominal oppositions: spirit and flesh; freedom and necessity; good and evil; conservatism and reform; art and science; reason and emotion; mankind and nature; traditional and technology; capitalism and socialism; the individual and the whole...we have scarified much to this precious for the sake of this philosophy of dualism...
> (Kurokawa 1993, 9)

Similarly, when they are understood as opposites, categories such as "city and village," "urban and rural," "modern and primitive," "formal and informal," and "order and chaos" do become mutually exclusive—with dire consequences for cities, especially in the developing world.

Interestingly, the fact that in Japan these categories were never seen as mutually exclusive allowed for a completely different landscape to emerge. According to Kurokawa, in Japanese cities order includes chaos or "noise," as he calls it in reference to Edgar Morin's theory of noise. This is why Japanese cities are so tolerant to those forms of urbanism that Western notions of planning and urban order would call "irrational," "messy," or even "slummy." Tokyo, says Kurokawa,

> is an agglomeration of three hundred cities... At first there seem to be no order, but the energy, freedom, and the multiplicity that comes from the parts are there. The creation of this new hierarchy is a process that makes use of spontaneously occurring forces. For this reason, it is probably most accurate to say that Tokyo today ... finds itself set somewhere between true chaos and a new hidden order. (1993, 11)

Few other countries have been as accepting of the (apparent) paradox of local self-development in urban land. Typically, as they expanded their spread and transportation network, Japanese cities have absorbed villages, while allowing them to keep developing in a gradual, incremental manner. In the postwar period in Tokyo, planning was for the most part limited to retrofitting localities with basic infrastructure and transport systems. The government encouraged local self-reliance and did its best to help local actors in their effort to rebuild their neighborhoods. This pattern of development has basically been maintained until today. It explains why Tokyo has one of the best infrastructures in the world, as well as a housing stock of great variety.

In most of Tokyo's neighborhoods one can still find wood and hardware stores selling self-help construction material used by local residents to maintain their houses. This is why, until recently, "the majority of neighborhoods were characterized by flimsy wooden constructions, and slum-type housing dominated many areas" (Hein et al. 2003, 26). Corrugated metal sheets and wood frames are still a fixture in many parts of Tokyo, particularly in neighborhoods traditionally inhabited by merchants and artisans known as Shitamachi, "the lower city." These parts of the city have much more in common with the slums of Mumbai than many would like to acknowledge. In fact, their human-scale, low-rise, high-density typology, and the way they have managed to preserve a strong economic and social life, with corner-shops, restaurants, bars, public baths, schools, and shrines, tell as much about their history as about the potential of places like Dharavi.
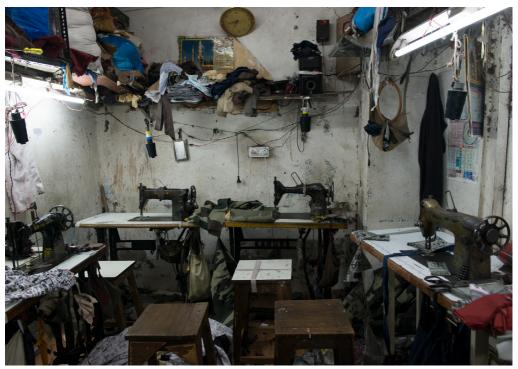
Live and Work

More than anywhere else these distant realities converged in the space of the artisan's home, which according to Japanese urbanist and writer Magoroh Maruyama, unified "the place of work and the familial space, reinforced the solidarity of local residents and maintained close relationships between neighbors" (Hiroshi 1994, 385). It also brought together employers and employees, who all stayed under the same roof. Maruyama deplores the exodus of business owners and landlords from their place of work in Tokyo to remote residential areas, which made them indifferent to the faith of their old neighborhoods.

The impact of this incision was most strongly felt in the multipurpose house of the artisan, where most of the goods that circulated in the preindustrial economy were produced. We call this flexible live-work arrangement the tool-house, because the space of the house itself is used as a productive tool in all kind of creative ways. A tool-house emerges when every wall, nook and corner becomes an extension of the tools of the trade of its inhabitant—when the furnace and the cooking hearth exchange roles and when sleeping competes with warehouse space.

The tool-house is still alive and kicking in neighborhoods such as Dharavi, and a million others all over Asia. Many will argue that this is because Dharavi is wrapped in a preindustrial time and space. We believe that Dharavi should instead be seen as some type of contemporary postindustrial landscape. After all, this is where the industrial, unionized mill workers were absorbed after the cotton mills started shutting down after the 1980s. What could be mistaken for an expression of backwardness is actually happening at an accelerating pace in first world cities like London, New York and Tokyo. What is the artist's loft if not a tool-house? Live-work arrangements are making a comeback in rich cities just as they are being castigated in developing cities. Indeed, the mixed-use live and work artisan's home continues to live many different lives.

The tool-house can be a container in Kabul, serving as a store during the day and a shelter for the night; a mud structure used as a covered working and resting space in an Indian village; a shack in a Mexican town housing a rural migrant family and its activities; an internet-based home-office operating from a Osaka flat; a warehouse converted into a recording studio with guest-rooms in Philadelphia; or a luxury condo apartment used as a party space and social venue in Copenhagen. The value of such spaces is maximized by their capacity to fulfill multiple functions with creative arrangements and flexible forms.

Photograph - Julien Gregorio

User-Generated Cities

The tool-house is the multishaped, multifunction building block of what we could call "user-generated cities." Such cities or neighborhoods are typically produced in increments rather than by design, in a piecemeal and decentralized fashion. There is no reason this age-old yet constantly updating urban development process could not be recognized and supported by planners and architects. The production of information about localities, the expression of individual and collective aspirations and visions, decision-making and many aspects of the implementation of urban plans can be done with the involvement of motivated local residents.

Fifty-years after Jane Jacobs' advocacy work in Manhattan, policy-makers and planning departments have yet to acknowledge what local knowledge and expertise can contribute to the planning process. Ignoring local actors comes at a high cost, accompanied as it is by strong oppositions, and more often than not results in inadequate urban development. It is only with a paradigm shift in the way we conceive of cities that we can actually tap into local intelligence and its productive capacity. In an age of "information" in which billions of people are exchanging bits and data across platforms and boundaries, we should no longer rely on the master planner's map and the one-way powerpoint presentations that pass off for community involvement.

Participatory workshops involving local actors, creative people and professionals, along with user-friendly, location-based web tools can be used to harness individual knowledge and collective imaginations, one neighborhood at a time. Grassroots initiatives are not just multiplying all over the world, they are also professionalizing their output like never before, presenting local development strategies that are often much more sophisticated and better informed than what governments are able to produce. Moreover, neighborhood groups are rarely as conservative as they are often portrayed.

We repeatedly see resident neighborhood associations articulating their own agendas in proposals that accommodate the interests of the government. Far from fighting for preserving the status quo, most neighborhood groups fight for change they can control. The concepts of citizen involvement and public participation have found their ways to planning departments in many cities around the world. However, their rhetoric rarely translates into innovative practices at the ground level. This is probably because at the end of the day, real estate interests, and not planning departments, dictate the urban landscape. But even then, it may well happen that developers, tired of having their projects delayed and stalled by defiant neighborhood groups, actually turn to participatory practices—in hopes that dealing with local interests at the conception stage of their projects rather than at the implementation stage may save time and money.

Photograph - urbz

In Conclusion

Urban renewal and redevelopment projects such as those described by Jane Jacobs in the West End of Boston and the West Village in New York City, or those happening today in Shimokitazawa, Tokyo, or Dharavi, Mumbai, all follow a familiar pattern of the state supporting increasingly large and global real estate bids on neighborhoods. After all, real estate acquisition and development remains the best way to cool off hot money.

The most disturbing part of this process is the fact that the government systematically evokes the messy and makeshift appearance of certain strategically located neighborhoods to justify their redevelopment, even when the proposed structural changes work against the needs and interests of local users. The violence of the redevelopment process is often compensated by tokenistic moves that focus on conserving some heritage symbols or involving a few local representatives in emerging political bodies.

In fact, replacing labyrinthine and pedestrian streets packed with small vendors and casual buyers with shopping malls and motorways is not as much an urban makeover as an economic takeover. At stake are the human-scale and organic characters of these neighborhoods, as well as their social, cultural and economic wealth. The first casualty of redevelopment projects are indeed local businesses, social networks, a sense of shared identity, and the ability of these neighborhoods to constantly reinvent themselves.

Most of us remember Jane Jacobs' successful opposition to one of the most powerful builders of all times, Robert Moses. She demonstrated that neighborhoods have the capacity to respond to takeover bids by making the stakes higher through political participation, business association, social cohesion, local skills and knowledge, street presence, collective expression and self-affirmation. Her writing taught us that these are not only forces of resistance, but also developmental impulses that have a long and complex history, from the village to the city and back.

References

1. Echanove, Matias and Rahul Srivastava. 2009. "Taking the Slum Out of 'Slumdog'", Opinion, New York Times, February 21. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/21/opinion/21srivastava.html

2. Hein Carola, Jeffry M. Diefendorf and Ishida Yorifusa (eds). 2003. Rebuilding Urban Japan After 1945. New York Palgrave Macmillan.

3. Henderson Garcia, Carol. 2002. Culture and Customs of India. Westport Greenwood Press.

4. Hiroshi, Tanabe. 1994. Les "territories" à Tokyo, in Augustin Berque (ed.) La Maîtrise de la Ville: Urbanité française, urbanite nippone. Paris: Edition de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

5. Illich, Ivan. 1973. Tools for Conviviality. New York: Harper & Row.

6. Jacobs, Jane. 1969. The Economy of Cities. New York : Random House.

7. Kurokawa Kisho. 1993. New Wave in Japanese Architecture, London: Academy Editions. Berlin: Ernst&Sohn.

8.Nandy, Ashis. 1998. The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

THE SLUM OUTSIDE

ELUSIVE DHARAVI

Introduction

Dharavi, in the heart of Mumbai, is supposed to represent the quintessential Asian slum. Crowded streets and busy markets; domestic workshops cheek by jowl with sweatshops producing both real and fake Pepe jeans; brick houses rising as high as their microscopic footprints allow; high-rises mushrooming here and there like gigantic shacks; schools in Kannada, Tamil, Hindi, English, Marathi, Urdu and other languages, usually with more than 50 pupils per class; temples of every Buddhist and Hindu denomination; flamboyant mosques so crowded that people have to pray on the streets during namaz; old churches with full congregations – remnants of the region's seventeenth-century Portuguese history – and new evangelical missions converting low-caste Hindus by the dozen; community toilets that double up as marriage halls; piles of garbage waiting to be picked over by scavengers; open drains running along narrow back streets; thousands of water pipes branching off in every direction.

Dharavi invariably confuses those eager to capture its reality in shorthand. Visitors looking for an essence of the place often land on its edges and corners, in spots that most Dharavi residents themselves have seen only on TV. They may be rewarded for their intrepidness by the sight of barefoot children walking on water pipes against the obligatory backdrop of garbage – a cliché that resonates so powerfully with familiar discourses on poverty and inequality that it obliterates the depth and complexity of the place. Dharavi is diverse and rapidly transforming, and it deceives as much as it overwhelms. It is an enigma that cannot be resolved by simply labelling it one thing or the other.

From the rooftop of Mohan Kanle's two-storey house, the neighbourhood seems part of the immutable story of urbanism, recalling medieval Italian towns, Istanbul's bazaars, the by-lanes of Benares, old Delhi, Guangzhou's urban villages and even Tokyo's dense residential suburbs. From this vantage point, it seems embedded in the shadow history of human settlements anywhere in the world where planning and control give way to incremental and small-scale development. In some parts, one

sees hundreds of low-rise structures so tightly packed that they appear to share one single cement-sheet roof. No wonder urban designers and architecture students love to imagine bridges connecting all of these houses, with new roofs acting as public spaces and gardens.

Mohan's house was built by his father in the early 1990s. Mumbai's extreme weather, with monsoon rain for four months and hot, saline air most of the year, has tested the limits of this humble structure. The roof has been leaking for a few years, forcing Mohan to install a shed as protection from the violent rains. About 18 people share seven rooms, which can be accessed from multiple entrances. The structure consists of a maze of connecting doorways and passages, and its uneven proportions are a legacy of its incremental growth. While not abnormally big for Dharavi, the house is larger than most others. There is no rule when it comes to the housing typology of Dharavi. Diversity is the only norm.

Mohan works with us. From our office in Dharavi we run URBZ[1], an experimental platform for collaborative urban practices, and the Institute of Urbanology[2], an urban planning and research studio. Our practice operates on the boundary between urban planning and anthropology, reflecting our own academic training. But more than anything else, we define ourselves as 'urbanologists'. To us, urbanology is the art and science of engaging with local processes and narratives, through collaboration with users. We believe that the inhabitants of a place are experts in their habitats.

As followers of Patrick Geddes, Jane Jacobs, John FC Turner and Ivan Illich, we see ourselves as part of a tradition of activists and thinkers who are sceptical of grand urban gestures and meta-narratives of order and efficiency. These gestures tend to reduce rich and diverse urban fabrics into simplistic plans, and typically favour technocratic and capitalist logics over local economies and incremental improvement. We are not, however, opposed in any way to architectural and urban creativity. One of our goals is to establish better communication between residents and local builders and professionals in the fields of architecture, planning and engineering. We think that professional and local expertise can be combined to produce outcomes that could never have been foreseen by any of the parties independently. And rather than advocating laissez-faire, we believe that the government has a responsibility to provide a high standard of services for every neighbourhood – regardless of its history or demographics – and to actively support local initiatives geared towards the improvement of habitat and society.

If that sounds like common sense, it is light-years away from what the government is planning for Dharavi. True, the situation is unusually complex. Dharavi is an expression of the best and the worst of what can happen when residents and 'users' have to take charge of the development of their habitats. This is the contrary

---

1. www.urbz.net
2. www.urbanology.org

reality we must engage with. And it is precisely because we felt that professionally trained architects and urbanists have so much to learn from user-generated neighbourhoods that we set up our office in Dharavi.

The office is located on the last stretch of Mahatma Gandhi Road, in New Transit Camp. The area was created to house people displaced in an earlier effort at transforming Dharavi, but since no one was able to decide on their final destination the residents stayed put, many others moved in, and the area took on a life of its own. The street is lined by trees planted by our landlord, who arrived here 30-odd years ago from the southern state of Kerala. His house – acquired from one of the original residents of the camp – is used as both a family home and a source of revenue. Besides our office, the incrementally expanded three-storey structure now contains a communications centre, a soft-drinks shop, a Chinese fast-food restaurant, three families and an embroidery workshop, which doubles up as a dormitory by night.

Deafening music often blasts from Ambedkar Community Hall across the street, congratulating newly weds or celebrating traditional festivals from Ganpati to Eid Ul Fitar or Christmas. Right next to the hall is a gym used by Schwarzenegger-wannabes, a karambol parlour, a Tamil temple, a fish market, a busy public toilet and a garbage dump that is not regularly serviced. A municipal truck periodically picks up the accumulated garbage, but we often have to tiptoe around piles of organic and inorganic waste. Incidentally, this up-close acquaintance with garbage is a fact of life even in middle-class areas of Mumbai, especially near local railway stations and bazaars. In Dharavi you have the same DNA of crowds, the same density and intertwining of human lives, that you find in the city's older neighbourhoods or in small towns all over the country – only perhaps in more concentrated form.

Knowing this, we started wondering how the subtle differences between Dharavi and other parts of Mumbai got magnified to create a narrative about the Great Slum – one that belongs to Mumbai but at the same time remains firmly outside it. Even after decades of debate and reporting, Dharavi remains in the popular imagination an anachronistic collection of temporary shacks inhabited by migrants from Tamil Nadu and Bihar.

This image is far from the reality we have been observing, documenting and engaging with over the past seven years. It is as important to understand what is so special about Dharavi as it is to debunk its mythified image. But the issue is not just an intellectual or an academic one: there are immediate practical concerns to address, relating to the many proposals put forward by the government and developers for the makeover of Dharavi. A series of interventions has so far led nowhere, because no one has been willing to negotiate the many dimensions that make up Dharavi's complex fabric.

All talk of participation and people-centric planning has remained at a superficial level. Every proposed 'solution' has ignored the vital fact that transforming Dharavi's appearance without engaging with its social and economic reality is a recipe for failure. It is our contention that any serious attempt at imagining Dharavi's future must begin with the recognition of its multi-faceted quality. Its diverse habitats,

modes of subsistence and aspirations must not be bulldozed by a masterplan – even at a conceptual level. Nor can anyone continue to pretend that, after more than 100 years of growth and development, Dharavi is still an illegitimate zone populated by squatters.

This essay is about the lived experience of Dharavi and the particular ways its inhabitants have shaped their environments over the years. It is also a plea to all those who are involved in imagining the future of Dharavi to begin from a consideration of its morphology. The point is not to preserve Dharavi in its present form: on the contrary, the history of this place is one of constant change and adaptation. Rather than freezing Dharavi into a masterplan defined by speculative interests and old-school urban planning – which are biased, respectively, against its population and its spontaneous spatial arrangement – we must invent another model of urban development entirely. This model has at its centre the 'end-users', considered as 'generators' of urban form. In Dharavi the user-generated city is not a theoretical proposition, but a reality. And although this reality may be far from perfect and in need of professional engagement, it needs to be factored in as a starting point. While we are not laying out a specific methodology of engagement in this essay, we try to share our knowledge and experience of Dharavi. We also present concepts that we have generated in our efforts to make sense of its complexity.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

The Making of Dharavi

Dharavi as we know it today is the product of a collision between history, bureaucratic pressures, political interests and a wildly expensive real-estate industry. A century ago the East Indian community owned significant amounts of land in Mumbai[3], but their rights were gradually eroded by the state's land reform initiatives, which limited the size of holdings. Village commons and attached agricultural land were progressively sold off for redevelopment, or simply taken over by builders and local Mafiosi with the connivance of politicians. Instead of finding legitimate ways in which middle-class and poor communities could share subsidised land, the city's political elite and the builder-developer lobby created one of the most expensive real-estate territories in the world. The result was the growth of informal settlements all over Mumbai – some of them as big as Dharavi, if not bigger.

Dharavi began to form around the fishing village of Koliwada in the late nineteenth century, when early settlers joined the existing Koli community. According to some accounts they were escaping – or being expelled from – a city in the grip of the plague. Mumbai's population was famously cosmopolitan, dominated by Parsis, the British rulers, Baghdadi and native Jews, along with a variety of Muslim communities and working classes from the Konkan region, among others. Dharavi was just as much a melting pot, but of poorer families from historically marginal communities. Many of its new inhabitants belonged to low-caste artisanal groups who settled in the marshy areas between Mahim, Sion and Matunga, in tracts of land deemed to be undesirable – and in some cases even uninhabitable – because it allowed them to continue practising crafts that were considered polluting in one way or another. Communities involved with leather tanning and pottery were among the earliest migrants.

---

3. Locals converted to Christianity by the Portuguese, whose presence grew substantially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and overlapped with British rule. The name is not determined by geography, but is apparently a reference of loyalty to the East India Company, which ruled parts of the region.

A group of Kumbhars – traditional potters from Gujarat – were even given an official 99-year lease by the government in the late nineteenth century.

In 1924 the city's first Tamil-language school was set up in Dharavi by the Bombay Municipal Corporation, in response to the demands of local residents who belonged to what was then a stigmatised, though highly politicised, 'ex-untouchable' community from the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This move acknowledged that even marginalised migrant groups were upwardly mobile and set great store by formal education. For Dharavi's diverse communities, moving to the city and establishing a modern identity through work and education was a crucial mode of emancipation. At the same time they made the most out of their physical surroundings using every means at their disposal, constructing sacred spaces and homes and crafting new modes of livelihood, applying old techniques and styles but adapting them to a free and modern urban environment.

In the 1930s the government constructed chawls in Dharavi – barrack-like structures ostensibly intended to improve the housing conditions and hygiene of municipal workers. Tellingly, many of these workers belonged to similar social groups as the existing residents. The authorities' concerted efforts to keep the more destitute migrants out of the colonial city meant that Dharavi was saddled – deliberately or not – with housing ever-increasing numbers of poor migrant families from all over the country.

Kumbharwada - Julien Gregorio

In Dharavi, however, the newcomers encountered a relatively open atmosphere, a useful aid to survival in a modern city that had still not overcome its traditional hang-ups about caste.

Soon after political independence, India officially adopted Soviet-style planning strategies. Mumbai's colonial trading legacy, as a bustling, globally connected port, now became suspect. The government frowned on entrepreneurial activity, which it saw as being motivated solely by profit, and the city's economic life became subject to stronger regulation. New laws prohibiting alcohol consumption and the circulation of large amounts of (tax-evading) cash opened up a whole new set of practices and narratives with messy complications. For example, Muslim communities with historical connections to overseas trading activities started to be accused of 'smuggling'. The culturally vibrant neighbourhoods in which they traditionally lived – such as Bhendi Bazaar or Mohammadali Road – were suddenly branded as 'dangerous'.

Dharavi also began to acquire a darker reputation around this time. Always perceived to exist on the frontiers of the colonial city, it now became – in the mindset of the police – a hotbed of criminal activity. These projections were mostly connected to its tradition of toddy tapping and alcohol brewing – which, in the age of prohibition, had become the basis of a grey economy that enmeshed everyone, from the police to local politicians.

In the late 1960s or early 1970s Dharavi acquired the dubious distinction of being labelled the largest slum in Asia. This was the period in which the economic aspirations of the neighbourhood – driven by its new schools, its settled families eager to embrace middle-class values, and its genuinely enterprising spirit – ran up against a wall of social prejudice. For the bureaucracy, the city elite and the media, the people of Dharavi were condemned to be eternally criminals or victims. What made them think they could change their lot? Dharavi was trapped between the well-intentioned but patronising welfare state (which made some moves to improve life for its residents), a suspicious civic bureaucracy (that did not take too kindly to its community-based enterprising energy) and an electoral democratic system in which it was seen as a voters' constituency (and always allowed to exist but never improve). The rest of the city saw it through a lens of caste prejudice or as a source of cheap labour.

Economic activities that nonetheless started to thrive in Dharavi around this time included processing food, making clothes, embroidering, tanning leather (subsequently banned), producing leather goods and recycling the city's garbage. In 1971 the passing of the Slum Act, which promised deprived areas priority access to basic infrastructure, caused a short-lived stampede of settlements actively trying to get categorised as 'slum areas'. The Act also recognised occupancy as a right, which meant the government had to provide alternative housing options if it wanted to 'reclaim' land from occupants. Although this principle wasn't always respected, it did provide respite for many, since it made expropriation more costly for the government and private landowners.

From the late 1970s on the concept of the 'informal economy' became more prominent in development policies. A few of the surveys and academic accounts of the time even acknowledge Dharavi's economic contribution to the city – long before its famed enterprise came under the global spotlight. From time to time the state also invested money, to show it was doing its bit. In 1985 Rajiv Gandhi announced the Prime Minister's Grant Project (PMGP), an ambitious scheme for the redevelopment of the area. The budget of Rs100 crores (c.US$160,000) was spent on infrastructure and housing, but it was not enough to take the 'slum' out of Dharavi. To benefit from the PMGP scheme, residents had to be able to pay the construction costs of their new dwelling and to have been a registered voter by or before 1985. These were conditions that disqualified most.

From the mid-1980s, the authorities experimented with various World Bank-financed 'sites and services' and slum-upgrading schemes in many parts of Mumbai. During these years, tens of thousands of people benefited from policies that encouraged them to build their own dwellings on land that the state had equipped with basic infrastructure. Others were encouraged to form cooperative societies to qualify to lease the land they occupied – an effective way to give their residency a more permanent status without simply 'giving away' the land or privatising it[4]. It is unclear whether any part of Dharavi benefited from these schemes, since the area was already under the PMGP. Generally, however, upgrading, retrofitting and user participation were part of a range of strategies deployed to rehabilitate slum areas.

By this time Dharavi was being mythologised by Indian cinema. One of its controversial figures, Vardarajan, a famed underworld leader, was first immortalised not by Bollywood – tellingly – but by Tamil cinema in the 1987 movie Nayagan. The Bollywood version, Dayavan, came out a year later and was a blockbuster hit. In 1991 another film, simply called Dharavi, portrayed the neighbourhood in a more complex and nuanced way, as a place that gave the poor some means of surviving in a brutal city.

From the 1990s onwards the Indian state increasingly gave up its socialist pretensions and began the process of liberalising the economy. For Mumbai this meant opening up the land to more development. Many more settlements had already grown around the city's new peripheries in the previous decade. As land became more expensive and real-estate speculation more lucrative, large-scale industrial production began to be dismantled. Depending on the ideological prejudices of the observer, this economic imbalance is blamed either on manipulative de-unionisation or on a rise in aggressive and overtly politicised unions. Either way, it pushed the city towards decentralised production practices and a growing informal economy in which

---

4. The Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto advocated individual land titling for slum-dwellers, which has been criticised by the likes of Mike Davis and others for promoting speculative takeovers of small plots by real-estate developers. For a good summary of the thesis and critique of de Soto see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hernando_de_Soto_Polar

settlements like Dharavi started to play a bigger role. At the same time, upgrading and self-help projects were abandoned as public land became too valuable for the poor to be allowed to occupy it. Officials refused to regularise the situation of slum-dwellers, routinely referring to them as squatters and thieves even though the land they'd reclaimed had often been uninhabitable to start with.

The 'Slum Rehabilitation Scheme', launched in 1996, became the authorities' chief response to the challenge of improving the living conditions of slum-dwellers in Mumbai. Against a backdrop of heightened real-estate speculation, the new scheme encouraged private developers to clear areas the municipality classified as slums. In exchange for building high-rise housing blocks in which each eligible family received a free c.225-square-foot unit, they got valuable 'transferable building rights' on public land. The result was a toxic developer–government nexus and an explosion of land scams and corruption. An internally commissioned government report on the scheme described it as 'nothing but a fraud, designed to enrich Mumbai's powerful construction lobby by robbing both public assets and the urban poor'[5].

In most cases, schemes of this sort also end up dividing the residents. Not everyone is eligible for free homes. Established residents, who have lived in a neighbourhood from the early phase of its growth, remain the main beneficiaries. The majority of residents – those who rent space as tenants and cannot prove older connections – are shunted out.

Incemental development by local builders in Dharavi - Julien Gregorio

For all practical purposes these schemes are less about rehabilitating slums and more about developing real estate for the market, with a minimum of local resistance. The quality of housing they produce is generally appalling, with new buildings quickly becoming less habitable than the slums they replace. Moreover, they erase the intricate enmeshing of economic activities and flexible construction practices characteristic of the older habitats and put in its place typologies – standardised blocks with little access to common spaces, streets and terraces – that make home-based livelihood practices virtually impossible.

From 2000 onwards, global players entered a fierce bidding war for the rights to redevelop Dharavi. An epic battle between diverse groups of residents, activists, developers and the government made the headlines week after week. Architecture studios from top-notch universities, prize-winning journalists, entertainers and other commentators all participated in the speculative frenzy that surrounded Dharavi and its future. The Dharavi Redevelopment Plan (or DRP) of 2004 imagined the construction of some $6,500,000m^2$. By far the largest part of this – $3,700,000m^2$ – was to be new residential and commercial space for sale. The remainder consisted of new facilities – housing, schools, parks – for the existing residents. But only those who had settled in Dharavi before 2001 were to benefit. And even then, each family was allocated only $25m^2$.

Major players in this drama included a real-estate consultant who had made his fortune in New York, some of the city's best-known NGOs, Janus-faced political parties and various representatives of 'the people' from Dharavi and elsewhere. The DRP rode the wave produced by the real-estate boom that had, over a generation, made land that was once abandoned seem 'scarce' and thus now eminently valuable. The battles were fierce and intense, but ended with the credibility of the global consultant being severely scrutinised.

On the one hand, a consultant to the DRP asserted that: 'If a city has ever had a chance to reinvent itself, to make its mark on the international world, I believe that the process through which it will happen is through slum rehabilitation. The whole country is waiting and watching for the first bulldozer to go in and bulldoze those slums so they can start doing it in their cities, too. I think this is really a pilot project for the rest of India and maybe even the rest of the world, as far as slums are concerned.'[6] On the other hand, social commentators insisted that 'we have a tragic way of dealing with rehabilitation in this country. We believe that we need to take people out from where they are, put them into multi-storey buildings, consume that land, and hope that we've succeeded. The Dharavi issue is not about relocation. It is about avarice. It is not about genuine benevolence. It's about greed.'[7]

---

5. Alternative Law Forum, Slum Policies, Part 3, 2011
6. Quote attributed to Shaan Mehta, from the MM Consultants group then working on the plan. Source: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia-jan-june09-mumbai_04-07/
7. Ibid., quote by Suhel Seth, Journalist and Social Commentator.

Bhau Korde – a social activist and life-long resident of Dharavi who is also an adviser to URBZ and Urbanology – is not impressed with the redevelopment project. In his view it is just another way in which the people of Dharavi are exploited. The 'free flats' that the government is promising in exchange for their land come at a great hidden cost. Even the 'lucky' ones who qualify for a flat and move into the new scheme will be disconnected from communities that have consolidated over generations. Many will lose their livelihoods. 'Where will the local shops and workshops go when Dharavi's houses are replaced by skyscrapers? People in Dharavi have made it on their own. What they need is recognition and support – not a free house. Any plan for Dharavi should be about people's development, not land development', says Bhau.[8]

While the city's activist groups remained unrelenting in their criticism, many people were seduced by the vision being unfolded in Powerpoint presentations. However, this dreamworld would collapse (and some local hopes soar) when the world economy imploded and several interested parties, including Lehman Brothers, went bankrupt. Unwilling to let go, the municipal government stepped in and through its official construction wing pushed for the redevelopment of Dharavi sector by sector.
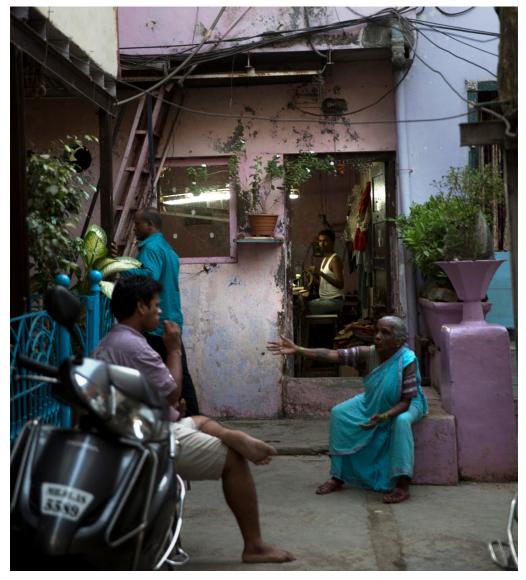
Now no one knows what will become of Dharavi. The neighbourhood still plays a central role in the city's economy, in particular its manufacturing sector, which absorbs a huge workforce. It is also the place where the hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers who service the city (domestic staff, hosts in hotels and restaurants, deliverymen, municipal workers, policemen and now, increasingly, white-collar workers in call centres and office jobs) find affordable accommodation.

Dharavi has improved incrementally over the years to become a self-confident working-class and lower-middle-class area. From the point of view of the new migrant, or that of the suburban slum-dweller, parts of Dharavi are even aspirational. It is, after all, a centrally located, superbly connected business hub with several municipal schools and dozens of private or NGO-run educational institutions. It has decent medical facilities and countless shrines and temples tailored to its fantastically diverse population. Over the years people have replaced their shacks with houses of brick and concrete, which often double as retail or production spaces. Yet, like many other areas of Mumbai, it remains under-serviced by the municipality. Excess garbage piles up, community toilets are overcrowded, and storm drains double as a sewage system. These are some of the torments that residents of Dharavi cannot solve on their own without the active support of the authorities.

----

8. Bhau Korde, resident of Dharavi – private discussions.

Like Dharavi, many other settlements have matured into neighbourhoods that have more to lose than gain from the rehabilitation schemes and redevelopment projects. We call Dharavi and other incrementally developed settlements of Mumbai 'homegrown neighbourhoods', emphasising the fact that they were built by local builders in response to the residents' needs. We feel that they are full of potential, and that their internal dynamics need to be understood more intimately.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

The (Planned) Destruction of Dharavi

Dharavi's story is one of always pushing back further the boundaries of the slum. Go to Koliwada, its oldest settlement, and ask. Residents will say this is a 400-year-old village and not a slum; the slum, they will inform you, is on the other side of Dharavi Main Road. On the other side of that road you will find a scattering of overgrown municipal chawls. Those tenants, who have been renting their apartments from the government for decades, will point to their neighbours who live in structures that look exactly like theirs and insist that those are the slums, not their homes. Their neighbours in turn will say that their houses are better than many middle-class houses in other parts of the city, and will point to their flat-screen TV and internet-wired computers to support their argument. They will direct you to the 13th Compound, where the recycling industry is located. That's probably where the slum is – at least it looks and feels more like one. Yet in 13th Compound people will say that this is an industrial area, not quite a slum, and perhaps those huts over there – gesturing to the edge of the settlement – are what you're looking for. You may finally see lines of recognisable shack-like structures.

That is the place where you might spot a little girl walking on a huge waterpipe next to what seems to be her home, and immediately recognise a picture you've seen a dozen times before: one that is frequently used to illustrate articles and documentaries on the apocalypse of urban life, the perfect symbol of a planet studded by slums. The girl may inform you that the redevelopment project is a threat, not an opportunity, if she can't prove she has been living here long enough. In all probability, her family moved there relatively recently, a few years short of the cut-off date that makes her eligible for a free flat after redevelopment. In that case, she and her family would either move to a settlement far away, or simply return to their ancestral village. When asked what life is like, living in a slum, she would probably say it is tough – with open drains and very little civic infrastructure – but she would also invite you inside the house, introduce you to her family, shut the door and insist that the slum is now firmly outside. This is her home –complete with an altar to a popular saint, cooking utensils hanging on the wall, a TV in a corner, and schoolbooks on the floor

– and to call it anything else would embarrass you. Especially when you accept a cup of sweet tea and are told that, for all its ills, this place is still better than the one left behind.

An action that purports to redevelop the slum would demolish her house, along with the homes of hundreds of thousands of people in the neighbourhood, and she would get nothing in return. She would be on the street, looking for a corner to squat as close as possible to where she used to live. On paper – in official documents – redevelopments of this kind would reduce the number of slum-dwellers in Mumbai, but in reality the vast numbers of the 'non-eligible' end up on the street or are forced out of the city. The 'lucky' ones are rehabilitated in mass housing mimicking middle-class buildings – minus quality and space. They then struggle to find a job somewhere in the city or simply sell their apartment and move on.

The slum remains elusive and hard to define. Waves of visitors to Dharavi are confounded to see hard-working lower-middle-class people sending their children to school and college, keeping their homes clean and coming together at night to watch a Bollywood movie on their TVs. Of course, not everyone enjoys these living standards; it is a diverse neighbourhood. And it is precisely this diversity that is often overlooked. Observers, architects, master planners and well-wishers are all too eager to oversimplify and dismiss the entire settlement as a slum.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

Their intentions are not always bad. Given the many negative aspects of life in Dharavi – mainly the result of a lack of state-provided infrastructure – it is not so surprising that urban practitioners (including us) would want to do something to further improve life there.

However, if we want to engage with the place in constructive ways, we need first to understand how those who live and work in Dharavi manage to create a different reality for themselves. The challenge for urban professionals is to add value to what is already there, rather than come up with new scenarios altogether. This shift in approach is all the more vital at a time when the city is rapidly and forcefully transforming its low-rise, high-density mixed-use neighbourhoods into suburban-type high-rise housing blocks. The bipolar way in which Mumbai sees itself, divided between 'backward' slums and 'modern' high-rises, needs to be challenged both pragmatically and creatively. Only then could Dharavi fulfil its potential and become a wholly functional part of the city without sacrificing its productive dynamism and cultural vibrancy.

As architect BV Doshi has observed, people in Dharavi have created conditions for themselves that could not be reproduced in any planned manner.[9] No matter how hard they tried, architects and planners would never be able to recreate its hyper-density, its mix of residential, working and retailing activities, and the communal bonds that tie its neighbourhoods together – for one thing, construction by-laws and zoning regulations would forbid it. At present, it is impossible to imagine a redevelopment project, even one designed with the best of intentions, that would not result in the evacuation of a majority of the residents from the place where they live and work. According to a report by the NGO in charge of surveying Dharavi, 'hardly 25 per cent of the slum-dwellers are found eligible [for rehousing] by the strict criteria of the competent authority'.[10] Incidentally, the figure attached to the population of Dharavi is itself the stuff of urban legend. Numbers ranging from 300,000 to a million are freely quoted, but with no convincing evidence to support either extreme.

Dharavi is far from being an ideal place. Its public schools, for instance, are still a long way from giving children the education they deserve. The municipality is also failing to respond adequately to the ongoing water and garbage crises that plague the area. Families are making do with homes that are too crowded for comfort. There is a shortage of toilets, both private and public. Working conditions can often be extremely difficult. And periodically political parties stir tension among different communities. But isn't this happening in most other parts of Mumbai and urban India today? These problems are systemic, not specific to Dharavi. And they are not being

9. Private conversation with BV Doshi at his Ahmadabad studio, 2012.
10. Sharad Mahajan (Mashal), 'Shelter Security Status In Dharavi', Report prepared for the Workshop on Shelter Security and Social Protection for the Urban Poor and Migrant in Asia, Ahmedabad, 11–13 February 2009. The criteria include having one's name and structure registered on the electoral roll prior to 1 January 2001.

addressed by current redevelopment plans for Dharavi. If anything, the plans would make conditions for most people much harsher than they are now.

Above all else, what is preventing Dharavi from becoming a well-functioning neighbourhood is the lack of political will to improve the situation, a consequence of market pressures and corruption. It is easier for politicians to keep a tight grip on a neighbourhood if it is labelled a 'slum' – a substandard area with little to offer the rest of the city. The word 'slum' is a value judgement that serves to adjust the potential worth of a habitat as the situation requires. Real-estate developers, government bureaucrats, residents in deprived neighbourhoods, middle-class citizens desirous of redeveloping their dilapidated structures, all use the word strategically.

The slum-word is contentious even in Dharavi, where some have endorsed it as a means of unifying all those who are victims of such prejudice, while others reject it by invoking legal deeds, their economic status or the quality of their homes. According to the latest census, some 62 per cent of the population of Mumbai are slum-dwellers. So the slum suddenly seems to be everywhere – even middle-class residents must either be besieged by or secretly living inside one. Yet these slums occupy less than 10 per cent of the residential land. Given this skewed situation, it does not make sense to view the vast majority of Mumbaikars as illegal slum-dwellers, especially when their occupation rights are recognised by the state.

Slum-dwellers pay high fees to state and other municipal bodies, most of them unaccounted for, in the form of bribes. Examples abound. For instance, residents have told us repeatedly that municipal workers will only repair a public toilet or fix an overflowing drain in Dharavi if they are paid by those who call them. Municipal garbage trucks are regularly rerouted to private construction sites in other parts of the city, while garbage piles up in Dharavi. Anyone building a new home will have to pay anywhere from 10 to 20 per cent of its cost in 'fees' to various people in positions of authority. The ban on repair and reconstruction of homes has only exacerbated the power of officials. To avoid unwanted attention, some contractors employ special effects to make brand new homes look old and shabby.
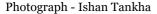
If water systems were provided and garbage collected regularly, if residents were allowed and helped to improve their homes, if they had access to a high standard of education and healthcare – then there would be no slum. Most of the hurdles facing the residents of Dharavi and other 'slums' in the city have to do with the attitude of the authorities, which prefer to keep these neighbourhoods on the edge and under their control. Managing them properly would amount to legitimising them, in effect killing off an informal cash crop and a vote bank for the politicians.

It does not take a high-flying consortium of designers and developers to imagine Dharavi's future. Just a bit of good sense and goodwill. As an urban expression, Dharavi is far more interesting than any architectural 'vision' we could ever dream of. In the age of the Tata Nano car and traffic jams, Dharavi's streets are almost exclusively pedestrian. Instead of the neat segregation of functions favoured by standard planning practice, living and working spaces are combined in the most creative ways. When the wisdom of the day is for Mumbai to go high-rise in order

to accommodate its ever-growing population, Dharavi absorbs more density in its low-rise homes. When India is losing markets to large Chinese sweatshops, Dharavi is responding with decentralised and flexible production networks. While the country's emission levels are increasing on a par with its economic growth, Dharavi is keeping its ecological footprint low. While the nation's major cities are struggling with rising criminality and social tensions, Dharavi's million eyes are keeping its streets safe. And while the city is cranking out ever-greater numbers of cheap and insalubrious constructions to house its poor, Dharavi is turning generation after generation of rural migrants into blue- and white-collar urbanites.

Before even asking what is wrong with Dharavi, we must understand what is right about it, so we don't destroy it. This is not about glamorising Dharavi or underplaying the hardship of those who live there. It is about adopting a context-driven, pragmatic approach to urban improvement, and keeping a cool head in the face of a speculative fever that is fuelling the most far-fetched design utopias.

The most potent argument for the redevelopment of Dharavi is that its population is squatting on government land, notwithstanding the fact that people have lived there for generations and built the area from nothing. The government's attitude generates a great deal of uncertainty with regard to occupancy rights in many parts of Dharavi. But one unintended consequence of this lack of clarity is that it makes it hard for anyone to speculate on the future value of a plot, since it could potentially be taken over by the government at any time. The market value of the place is therefore determined purely by its short-term use value.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

The question for someone who buys a house in Dharavi (through one of its numerous real-estate agents) is not: 'How much can I hope to get if I sell the land in two or ten years' time?' but 'What kind of value would it generate if I use it for one or two years?' The market is not speculative, since space has no value beyond its use value. Buying land in Dharavi and keeping it unused would make no economic sense whatsoever. Of course, this would change completely if residents were given property titles – something that would be incredibly complex to execute because ownership is always contested at multiple levels. Giving each plot a speculative value would also deliver the entire area into the hands of the speculators and lead, inevitably, to the redistribution of one of Dharavi's most valued resources – space. Accumulation in the hands of a few and the destruction of use value by speculative value would be the result.

Whenever space is being used as a financial asset that can be traded on global markets, empty flats are produced. It makes sense for investors to keep properties empty, since they are more easily resold that way. This mechanism explains why, according to the latest census, nearly half a million residential flats stand empty in Mumbai today, despite the extremely high demand for rental space and the fact that the city is one of the most densely populated in the world.

Overheated property prices also create the need for a specific type of construction. The high-rise building is a global standard and the exchange value of each flat or office space is easily evaluated on the basis of the construction cost and the price of land at any given point. It is the most tradable form of real-estate asset. An investor in New York can easily buy 15 flats in Mumbai to diversify his portfolio. A fund may put down US$100 million for the development of a high-rise building in central Mumbai or a new town on the outskirts. Before construction starts, most flats or office spaces may already have been sold to other investors. These property titles can then be sold on in turn, so a flat may well be bought and sold several times over before it is even built, with profits to be made at each stage. This is the most vivid expression of what Slavoj Zizek calls the 'virtual, spectral domain of Capital' – an exchange value of 'space' that is completely disconnected from its use value.[11] It is therefore clear that what determines the vertical form of most urban design proposals for Dharavi is not the need to absorb more population density, but the desire to generate more speculative value.

The influx of money into construction is generating jobs, for sure. But it is also restructuring the economy away from the local market towards a global demand for fictitious real-estate assets that bear no relation to the needs and means of the city's residents. What Zizek calls the 'mad dance' of capitalism may soon destroy the livelihoods of the people of Dharavi and add hundreds of thousands to the list of casualties of Mumbai's speculation fever.

---

11. Zizek, S. (2001) Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri Rewritten the Communist manifesto for the Twenty-First Century? Rethinking Marxism, 3/4.

One need not look to Shanghai or Singapore for a vision of this future: it is already being realised at an accelerated pace in the suburbs of New Delhi and Mumbai, with their multitudinous high-rise residential towers, office buildings and shopping malls standing on ever-wider and multi-layered roads. At a time when proximity, mixed-use zoning and self-employment are lauded around the world as essential to sustainable urban and economic development, this model turns everyone into a commuter and an employee. Sadly, it is also the future proposed for Dharavi.

Photograph - Julian Gregorio

The Tool House

What would help Dharavi is a genuine attempt to understand its unique processes and to examine how these translate into built forms. Rather than seeing its structures as makeshift, temporary and a result of 'informal' processes, it would be more useful to think of them as belonging to another narrative altogether. The enmeshing of spatial, social and economic principles in Dharavi is powerfully symbolised by one ubiquitous house type – a structure and a mode of organisation that we call the 'tool-house'. Simply put, the tool-house is a space that is used both for living and for income-generation. And this device is fundamental to the logic that sustains homegrown settlements.

Conceptually located between Le Corbusier's machine for living and Ivan Illich's convivial tool, the tool-house emerges as a spontaneous response to the need to optimise space in a context of scarcity, but it is also embedded in a cultural mould where community ties permeate both personal and professional spaces. The tool-house is not unique to Dharavi. The traditional artisan's house in pre-industrial Europe was a tool-house. Typically, the master and his family would live on the first floor and the workshop would be on the ground floor, which would double up as a dormitory for workers or apprentices. Mumbai's tool-house is also an avatar of postwar Tokyo's home-based manufacturing unit or Singapore's shop-houses. Tool-houses still exist throughout Asia and the world. And even in the most developed economies, some professions – among them lawyers, GPs and architects – have always carried out their business in residential types of buildings.

There are no tool-houses in master-planned and zoned neighbourhoods, where living and working are effectively segregated by building codes and land use regulations. These codes are mainly the product of postwar urban planning practices in Europe and the US, but they cast a shadow on Asian cities as well – as a normative standard for contemporary urban planning which discourages live–work arrangements as anachronistic. While this approach has been revised in Western cities in recent years, it remains the norm in cities such as Mumbai.

The tool-house as a typology has proved to be enduring, especially in parts of the world where zoning codes are flexible (or where the government is too weak to impose them). Even in post-industrial cities such as New York or Berlin, the tool-house has re-emerged in the form of the artist's loft, designer's or writer's den, or IT worker's home-desk.

In Dharavi, most structures have multiple functions. They can take the form of embroidery workshops which double up as dormitories for migrant workers; family homes with a small shop attached; artisans' rooms; informal home-kitchen/takeaway restaurants; a priest's home, community shrines and so on. Tool-houses are usually clustered together and create lively mixed-use neighbourhoods where you can find everything you need within walking distance. The tool-house is organically connected to the unit of the family, the community and the neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods made of tool-houses have a village feel, yet they do well in urban contexts.

Functional optimisation of living spaces is a feature of many high-density cities throughout the world, but it is nowhere as prevalent as in Asia. Tokyo, Hong Kong, Bangkok and Mumbai often fascinate visitors for this reason. We've seen countless photo-documentaries showing tightly organised interior spaces in Asia, with the bicycle hung up, the bed slotting into the wall at the push of a button, the kitchen doubling as a bathroom and so on. Futuristic visions of metabolic structures made of 8m2 residential capsules have been built – and abandoned – in Tokyo. But no other city has pushed the integration of functions further than Mumbai.

In Mumbai, domestic spaces in low-income neighbourhoods often incorporate productive or commercial activities such as cottage industries or retailing. This extreme exploitation of space is often seen as a consequence of poverty: in a context where space is scarce and expensive, its value must be leveraged as intensely as possible. Yet, the relation to space – and by extension to the people who occupy it – is also defined socially and culturally and cannot be reduced to economic imperatives alone. Throughout South Asia, even in contexts that are not space-poor, the home is not only a personal or family space but easily accommodates visitors and multiple functions. In India, social structures such as the family, community and caste play an important role in income-generation and space-formation. It is fairly common to see children or grandparents helping out at the counter of a shop while the parents are busy elsewhere. Skills, tools and clientele are often passed on from one generation to the next. Community ties facilitate business transactions and transmission, as it is easier to trust people who come from the same village or go to the same temple. Thus the house is often open to the extended family, which includes people from the family's place of origin. Having distant relatives sharing sleeping space on the floor for a few weeks is not unusual, even in middle-class families.

Slums are imagined as spatially disconnected from the economic life of the city. But even the small businesses and low-income families of Dharavi are deeply integrated into the urban system and economy of Mumbai through institutions such as schools and political parties, business transactions, communication technologies and transport networks. The inability of the authorities to accept and support

incremental development in unplanned settlements means that important insights about the way the country is actually developing are ignored. Dharavi has much to teach about urban dynamics that are unfolding all over the world, in contexts as varied as Japan and Brazil.

Just as Henry Ford brought scientific methods of management to car manufacturing with the assembly line, so master-planners impose strict regulations on land use with the aim of producing functional neighbourhoods. The main casualty of this kind of planning ideology is the human scale of neighbourhoods, with some cities becoming as alienating as factories. Think of the generic central business districts, master-planned suburbia stretching for mile after mile, and satellite towns with rows of mass-produced buildings meant for the economically marginalised. This is the history of many cities and the unfortunate future of many more.

The residents of Dharavi have been developing the neighbourhood for generations. Today many of its tool-houses are highly integrated, technologically and economically, into global production and distribution networks, making goods that are sold throughout the world. Dharavi's development relies on decentralised post-Fordist modes of production where a multiplicity of small units offer just-in-time delivery with minimal inventory.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

Tokyo's rise to prominence in the last decades of the twentieth century was based on the integration of small-scale specialised production and large-scale export-oriented industries. It produced advanced consumer goods by assembling small parts produced through a network of subcontractors operating at different scales.

In a post-Fordist world system, the tool-house can be completely integrated into the global economy and constantly retrofitted with new technologies to increase its use value. If instead of pushing for wholesale redevelopment, the government were to encourage home improvement and technological investment in Dharavi's countless small-scale operations, it would allow the entire neighbourhood to bloom into a world-class manufacturing hub in no time. There is absolutely no obstacle to this from the viewpoint of environmental and safety norms.

The multi-faceted tool-house is not a consciously designed product. Its structure and use evolve over time. It is always a work in progress. Every once in a while, its users add something to it, remove any dysfunction and improve it. Every tool-house tells a story of such change. Most begin as simple ground-level spaces, sometimes without brick walls. Then basic structures are added – the construction is cheap and flimsy, but enough to produce some wealth through the exchange of services or by sub-renting space or producing something. The money is then reinvested in improving the structure, which further increases revenue.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

As families expand, the need for space and income-generating activities also grows. Reinvestment in the tool-house means higher revenue-generating capacities. The virtuous cycle between income-generation and structural improvement, and the fact that tool-houses are usually clustered and networked, means they have a positive impact on the neighbourhood. In this sense the tool-house is a vehicle for collective upward mobility. It is a mechanism that can help lift a settlement out of the poverty trap.

For people who have no money to move anywhere else, the tool-house offers access to an alternative form of mobility. Owning a tool-house is the most important step towards freedom from economic and social oppression for many low-caste immigrants to Mumbai. The next best thing is to rent one, although security of tenure is non-existent for units that are not rent-controlled. By transforming the house and optimising its income-generating capacity, individuals can transform their destiny.

The integration of activities from one house to the next, notably through subcontracting networks, means that neighbourhoods often develop in concert. And as neighbourhoods improve, their form, functions and uses evolve and the inhabitants respond to these changes by further developing their skills. New economic activities, technologies and income levels transform the neighbourhood bit by bit, incrementally. When it is not spent on improving the house or investing in the family business, additional income is used to send children to a good school, which guarantees them and the family a better status in the long run. It is difficult to find a better example of what the process of 'development' is all about in its holistic dimension.

The environment is deeply connected to processes of collective growth, to the impulse to constantly improve and transform the space. In this way, with very little capital, user-generated neighbourhoods are totally invested in the idea of growth and mobility – it is almost as if there is no other choice but to keep growing. Interconnectedness and interdependence are de facto principles of economic activity – even if they are not always a political ideal – of neighbourhoods in-formation.

The neighbourhood in-formation, as a collective urban artefact, shares some organisational principles with the tool-house as an architectural typology. The first active principle is multiplicity of uses. A tiny 10m2 room may need to accommodate sleeping space, workspace, kitchen, shrine, television set and washing space, as well as storage. Multiple uses allow for many permutations of living and working. Within the tool-house itself, different members can perform different activities simultaneously.

The multiplication of activities within homes and their integration at the level of the neighbourhood means that scarce space is optimised so as to accommodate as many functions as the social and economic life of a neighbourhood may require: houses, shops, temples, streets, water systems, toilets and so on. Thus the fabric is not simply dense: it is always simultaneously diverse. Those who live and work in Dharavi can satisfy most of their everyday needs (from consumption to religion) within a five-minute walking radius. In any sub-section of a neighbourhood at any given point of time, one can find a huge diversity of functions and activities in close proximity to each other.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

Another principle common to both the tool-house and the neighbourhood in-formation is the superimposition (or layering) of functions. The tool-house's ground floor can be a shop and its first floor a living space; then an additional floor is built and generates income through rent. Functions can also be layered temporally: the ground floor can be a dormitory at night, or a space where extended family members sleep. Sometimes the first floor is the place of living but also the place where family members do some components of work. In the day a worker may also work there.

The logic of layering is extended into the street. The doorstep of the house can also function as a meeting place for business transactions or social interaction. The window can be used as a shopfront to sell goods. Some uses can temporarily take over entire parts of the neighbourhood: the street as pedestrian transportation system and/or market at rush hour; religious celebrations using all available space for an hour or for a day; the entire neighbourhood becoming a quiet dormitory between 1am and 5am.

As uses are multiplied and overlaid, they intermingle and merge. The restaurant becomes a meeting space for business transactions (face-to-face or on the phone); the wholesale shop functions as an office. The kitchen hearth becomes a furnace. The cupboard storing clothes also becomes a storage space for commercial goods. At the level of the neighbourhood, merging living and working space creates different patterns of mobility, encouraging the integration of social and professional networks, economic cooperation (over competition) and the clustering of productive activities.

User-Generated Dharavi

On one level, the built environment of Dharavi is nothing but the sediment of successive waves of migrants who have come in search of better prospects. To walk through Dharavi is to see history unfold – history with a small 'h', because it is the kind that doesn't make it into textbooks. Tiny homes and post-industrial workshops (for everything from embroidery to the assembly of sub-parts of household gadgets) are interleaved with chai stalls, grocery stores and timber yards. Wander a while in these alleyways, and you get a powerful sense of how ethnic groups connect organically with economic activities in their search to reinvent their lives.

Acts of construction are powerful symbols of such a reinvention. One Buddhist shrine derives its iconic architecture from an ancient monument in Central India but is adorned with an image of Babasaheb Ambedkar, a graduate of Columbia University and the London School of Economics who engraved fundamental principles of equality into the Indian constitution. Ambedkar is an inspiration to the millions of citizens who, like him, belong to the Dalit (once known as the 'untouchable') community. This temple stands next to a Hindu Tamil place of worship made by others from the same community, but from a different region of the country.

Such community shrines often formed the nucleus around which Dharavi's village-like settlements would grow. Their construction was sometimes a strategic move to gather community support for the occupation of a particular space. It could also be an assertion of cultural mobility – a reaction to being denied the opportunity to build back home in the ancestral village, usually because of caste tensions. The shrines were also sites for mobilising political support and bases for local leadership to emerge. In a study of the religious architecture of Dharavi we have catalogued and mapped over 150 sacred places (perhaps only half or two thirds of the total).[12]

12. http://urbz.net/religious-sites-in-dharavi

Post-independence, from the 1950s onwards, many Dalits and tribal communities followed Dr Ambedkar's injunction to escape caste and economic oppression in their villages by moving to the city and becoming self-made men and women. Those who came one, two, three or more generations ago opened shops, started businesses or offered their manpower to others. The bitter hardship that poor migrants had to face – making it from scratch in one of the most challenging environments imaginable – was made bearable only by the memory of an even harsher past and the promise of a better future for the next generation, through education and more hard work.

A few years ago, we helped an advocate and life-long resident of the Omkar Cooperative Housing Society in Dharavi make a case for the self-development of their municipal chawl at a Human Rights Court. The residents were arguing that they should not be forced into any slum redevelopment project since they were not encroachers or slum-dwellers but municipal tenants. We organised a studio with graduate students from Columbia University that generated plans showing how every household would be able to double its living space if the housing society was allowed to expand its chawls vertically (as many had already done). Unfortunately, the residents lost the case. Although there is a legal provision for chawl residents to form a cooperative society and propose their own redevelopment project, it didn't apply in this case since Dharavi was (and still is) under a special government programme, the DRP. The Human Rights Court recognised the right to self-develop but declared that since that right had not yet been violated, no case could be made.

Chawls are a classic feature of Mumbai. They became synonymous with working class tenements around industrial areas, their form derived from British army barracks – linear, one-room housing, with community toilets at the end of each corridor. Many of the chawls in Dharavi were built in the earlier part of the twentieth century by the municipality to house officially employed sweepers and cleaners. Today, these clusters have become indistinguishable from the urban fabric that has sprawled around them. Overgrown, expanded, subdivided, decorated, individualised, they look like any other small home in Dharavi. The only distinctive spatial feature that they have kept over time is their linear organisation: a row of rooms with a shared toilet. More than anything else, what distinguishes the chawls is the sense of entitlement of their residents. Many of them have been continuously paying a frozen rent to the municipality for generations, which gives them an inalienable right to occupy the land. Yet this detail tends to be blurred in the larger representation of the neighbourhood as a whole.

One community that has successfully come together (for the time being) against the DRP is Koliwada, the fishing village around which Dharavi developed. The Kolis (original inhabitants of Koliwada) feel particularly threatened by the project as they have larger homes, thanks to their historical presence. An elected representative of the Koli community, Ravi Keny, asked us to help them produce an alternative vision for the future of Koliwada. We organised an 'Urban Typhoon' workshop – a community-centred brainstorming session in which designers, urbanists, artists,

architects and philosophers worked in groups with local residents to generate stories and projects about Koliwada today. These included creative scenarios for the future of the neighbourhood. It was an experiment that allowed us to develop a firmer base in Dharavi and open more channels of engagement with the diverse sets of groups.

Tenancy, occupation rights and land ownership are pressing issues in Dharavi, as they are in other parts of Mumbai (including the wealthiest of neighbourhoods). It was the hope of the leaders that a new plan for Koliwada would help resolve the complications of co-tenancy while respecting the community's traditional needs and maintaining their rental income. This was a tall order in many ways, but by no means unachievable, given the possibilities that Dharavi itself generates through its proven ability to deal with high levels of density.

The community was not particularly interested in historical preservation. The idea that the future would inevitably be high-rise seemed so rooted in peoples' minds that they could hardly envision the low-rise, high-density alternative that appealed to the architects and urban planners present at the workshop. The guest participants appeared more interested than the residents in preserving the present feel of the neighbourhood. At the same time, there was a willingness amongst the community to explore all types of alternative ideas for redevelopment.

Construction in Dharavi - Julien Gregorio

Residents had in mind that their own scheme would have to be cross-subsidised by the sale of market-rate condos and commercial spaces. Koliwada needed a school, a community space and a playground. By taking the redevelopment process into their own hands, the community hoped to retain for itself, either in the form of cash or space, the profits that would otherwise be shared between developers and the government under the SRA (Slum Rehabilitation Authority) and DRP schemes discussed above.

Architect Charles Correa came to the workshop to talk to participants and addressed the question of density. He opened his presentation with a slide indicating the minimum amount of space that he felt should be reserved for amenities – 10m2 per person was his ideal figure. In Koliwada, the space available per capita is probably about 3m2 – and that has to cover not just amenities but living space, workspace and everything else. Correa proposed that Dharavi should be de-densified (echoing his earlier attempt at decongesting Mumbai by creating the new city of Navi Mumbai). According to his line of calculation, Dharavi should have a maximum population of 134,400 (based on a strict functional division of space: 60 per cent for housing, 20 per cent for work and 20 per cent for roads). This total is a mere 10 to 20 per cent of the estimated current population.

Photograph - Ishan Tankha

Correa's main point was not that 10m^2 of amenities is the minimum requirement in any context. He was arguing that as we increase population density we must also increase public space. Above a certain building height, going higher doesn't magically liberate more space on the ground. To go vertical in order to 'house the poor is a fallacy', he concluded. High-rises cannot absorb the population of Dharavi and at the same time provide decent living standards.

A group of workshop participants led by architect and philosopher Yehuda Safran responded by rejecting the idea that density was an objectifiable dimension of urban life. Density, they argued, was Mumbai's essence: 'Density is not a limit, but the core of the urban condition.' This turned Correa's argument on its head, celebrating density as a marker of Koliwada's urbanity. The group presented Koliwada – usually referred to at best as a 'village' and at worst as a 'slum' – as fundamentally urban and central to the city's identity. [13]

Another counter-argument was the quality of life in Koliwada that comes from the proximity between work and home.[14] Dharavi has seven municipal schools. From the nearby highway, students can also take buses to colleges in other parts of the city. Two large train stations are within walking distance, and a large park, the Mahim Nature Park, is down the road. Amenities are important but they cannot – as Correa would have it – be a fixed percentage, otherwise people are inevitably displaced.

Finally, we challenged Correa's neat division of land use. In Dharavi and in many other parts of Mumbai and Asia, space is not segregated in such a neat way, nor is it clear that the quality of life would necessarily improve if it was. Koliwada residents don't worry about letting their kids play in the street, as the neighbourhood is fully pedestrian. People interact in the streets and the small lanes. The space in front of homes is often used as a public space. And many workspaces are located inside homes.

In attempting to create a vision for the future of Koliwada, the workshop produced divergent opinions that reflected the divisions in the community itself. Some of the participants argued that what gives Koliwada its character is its village-like feel. High-rise buildings can be seen all over the city and they rarely provide the same sense of a neighbourhood. Moreover, they are often badly built and expensive to maintain. These participants recognised the historical value of the neighbourhood and thought it essential to define an approach that would preserve that character.

---

13. The final output of each team is available in M Echanove and R Srivastava, Urban Typhoon Workshop Koliwada-Dharavi, Mumbai, March 16–22, 2008: Report. Mumbai. Available online at http://www.urban-typhoon.com and http://urbanlab.org/UrbanTyphoonMumbai.pdf.
14. According to data presented by Philipp Rode at the Urban Age Mumbai conference, 55 per cent of people walk to work in Mumbai!

The other camp explained they were tired of being called slum-dwellers, and that the village-like character of Koliwada was precisely what was responsible for its bad image. Embracing the prevalent notion that high-rise is high-class – a step up in status – they saw a high-rise approach as offering a better chance of leveraging finance for the project, since flats in modern buildings this close to the centre are extremely valuable. Added to this, they said, many of the old houses of Koliwada may look nice from the outside but lack modern equipment. Interestingly, many residents liked the community feel of the neighbourhood and didn't think it would necessarily dissolve with a change of typology. They also hoped that a large-scale redevelopment of the entire neighbourhood would include an overhaul of its dysfunctional infrastructure.

The challenge was to reconcile these two arguments. The first one took a larger view of the neighbourhood, both in relation to the historical context of the city and to its present aesthetic and social value. The other view was focused on immediate needs and the aspiration to greater comfort and status. It took some discussion to see that these visions were not necessarily incompatible. It was possible to build modern, comfortable buildings and improve infrastructure without destroying the character of the neighbourhood. One way was to preserve the street pattern and scale while developing the infrastructure and rebuilding houses on their existing footprint.

Some of the participants focused on a single plot and showed how, by respecting the footprint and the grammar of existing structures, it was possible to build a low-rise structure that would provide comfortable living conditions and additional space without denaturing the street. That kind of intervention is very similar to what happens in Tokyo, where existing houses on small plots are constantly replaced without the overall feel of the neighbourhood being dramatically altered.

It is hard to imagine how Dharavi could undergo a wholesale redevelopment and still retain all of its demographic makeup, its cultural vibrancy, its deep social networks and its economic dynamics. The most viable approach is to let it continue its own long and successful development process while providing it with all the support it needs – which includes new infrastructure and services. The idea that Dharavi could be retrofitted and incrementally improved, with the help of the municipality, NGOs and private actors, needs to be expressed creatively.

Some participants produced provocative photomontages showing Koliwada next to Italian towns beloved of tourists from the world over: 'Which one is Koliwada?', they asked. This had the powerful effect of validating the historical, incrementally produced urban form of Koliwada and questioning normative assumptions about what cities should look like. Trying to make the point that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with either the way Dharavi was developing or the way it looked, we produced a photomontage that merged it together with Shimokitazawa, a hip neighbourhood in Tokyo. The subtext: Tokyo is one of the most advanced cities in the world, yet it also improves incrementally. Why can't Mumbai follow the same path?

A history of incremental development connects urban contexts that everything else seems to set apart. Who would imagine that neighbourhoods in Japan or Italy could be compared to those in Mumbai? Moreover, incremental growth – rather than the grand master plan – is the default form of urban development all over the world. Some of the greatest and most revered cities and neighbourhoods have emerged out of this process. And yet it continues to be dismissed in cities like Mumbai, where urban development is dominated by speculative interests and narratives of a world-class and master-planned city.

Over the last few years we have documented and participated in local construction in Dharavi and other 'homegrown' neighbourhoods in Mumbai, Rio, São Paulo and Shenzhen. We have a long-standing interest in habitats that are developed incrementally by local residents and builders, with minimal help from the government and no involvement from professional architects or engineers. The skills and hands-on experience of many local contractors easily outmatch the technical knowledge of the best-trained professionals. In Mumbai's homegrown neighbourhoods, in peak

Dharavi - Tokyo mashup collage - urbz

construction periods, a typical contractor builds or repairs up to five houses a month. Wherever localities have security of occupation, fine settlements are able to emerge. With political support, water supply, electricity and paved roads start to exist and function. And as the infrastructure and security of tenure improve, so does the quality of individual homes, with end-users investing large amounts of money to upgrade their living space.

Working closely with local contractors in Dharavi and other homegrown settlements in the city, we have encountered talent, skills and insights that would make established architects begin to question the meaning of professional training. These contractors, however entrepreneurial they may be, are also ultimately products of the places in which they work. They have grown up there, developed bonds of trust (or suspicion), learned to work around bureaucratic procedures and found ways of making a livelihood by helping people fulfil their feverish desire to build and makeover their lives. We have attempted to insert ourselves into this local place-making. We have co-designed sacred spaces of all denominations and faiths, homes and shops, interiors and exteriors, trying to engage creatively in this complex, fraught and contrary environment. And what is clear is that construction in homegrown neighbourhoods is an expression of social and civic action.

We learn a great deal by documenting the process of working together with these local actors. Here is one of our collaborators at URBZ, Marie Malchow, describing Murugan, a self-made builder from Dharavi, rebuilding two three-storey houses:

The impression on the first days was all about speed. How very fast the scene changed. Every day a different setting awaited me. In Mumbai I had seen civic projects languishing over months. Here, I was able to see development within hours. In two days the two old houses were removed, even as the labourers worked very carefully to preserve as much material as possible for the reconstruction. Subsequently, the masons began their job. I was amazed by their quick and exact ways of working. With relatively few tools they were able to build up the three storeys brick by brick. The cement needed was mixed on the spot – a practice only possible with a precise knowledge of the various mixing proportions.

It seemed that the contractor had gathered a stock of different skilled labourers around him over the years – and with this network he was able to organise a dynamic working process without any gaps or lack of supply. As soon as the masons were finished with the raw construction, flagstones were ready to cover the ceiling and the plastering of the walls began. Thus, the two houses grew step by step.[15]

Looking at the morphology of Dharavi, we recognise the central role of the contractor as a mediator between end-users and the built environment. There is something truly magical about the way its small houses are being built and rebuilt, despite an official ban on new construction. At the same time, this is also a quality that appears to be truly universal. One can see it in other hyper-dense streets of Mumbai's homegrown neighbourhoods, in the by-lanes of 'favelas' in São Paulo, or even in the low-rise, high-density residential areas and meandering streets of Tokyo. In this light,

the paradoxes that define Dharavi become fables about urban spaces everywhere. Dharavi is a symbol of both Mumbai's inability (and unwillingness) to respond to the basic housing and infrastructure needs of its population and of the ability of Mumbaikars to address these needs on their own.

---

15. Notes from a blog entry on local construction practices in Dharavi by Marie Malchow, http://urbz.net

Dharavi - Shenzhen mashup collage - urbz

Dharavi - Sao Paulo mashup collage - urbz

Conclusion

The prime motivation behind the redevelopment plan for Dharavi is to create higher land values, and eventually to facilitate a new speculative economy for residential and commercial buildings. Most residents will not gain more legitimacy, money or independence from this process. On the contrary, they will either have to integrate into the new economy as service-providers or leave.

New real-estate development zones subscribe to a certain kind of appropriate built-form – the non-slum structure, which is usually a marketable commodity meant for a speculative market. In cities like Mumbai this process escalates costs and pushes the poor ever further into the corner. The speculative exploitation of Dharavi's valuable land will convert a living neighbourhood into a dead colony.

It is well known that the city's real-estate and construction industry is in cahoots with the state government and bureaucracy, which are in a hurry to see this process unfold as quickly as possible. The high-rise apartment block is being pushed as a quick fix for all problems of density and alleged squatting, but in reality it comes with increased costs of building and a new economy of land-use. Thus, the ex-slum-dwellers are squeezed into tiny housing blocks next to the high-end flats built on the land released by the slum redevelopment project.

The ineffectiveness of slum redevelopment projects in the mould of the proposed master plan for Dharavi is increasingly evident. As so-called slums continue to dominate the city, tracts of precious (hitherto not even available) land are used to create units for the real-estate market. Defying all logical use of space, more and more of these complexes are appearing in Mumbai, absorbing ever-smaller populations at ever-spiralling costs. Rather being designed to house more people, fresh construction is manipulated in response to speculative needs – with swimming pools, enormous personal spaces, multi-storey car parks and lush empty gardens. The instant space is released onto the market, it is gobbled up by the construction industry for resale to speculators or high-end users. Paradoxically, then, the more space that is released, the scarcer it becomes.

India today offers the spectacle of what Guy Debord called urbanisation without a city[16] – an urbanisation of highways, flyovers, high-rise buildings and shopping malls that strips the city of its essence: the neighbourhood and its streets, with all the creative potential they contain. Instead of recognising how much Dharavi embodies the spirit of the city, the plan of the authorities seems to be to transform it into yet another suburb where no sense of place or history will remain. This goes against everything that Dharavi has meant for the city.

Over the past decades Dharavi has allowed countless migrants to reinvent their identities while distancing themselves from older caste histories. Here they have found the freedom not only to open their own businesses but also to worship forbidden gods, construct prohibited shrines, transcend caste prejudices. Residents participate in the practice of electoral democracy with gusto. If there is anything that competes with the carnivalesque celebrations of religious festivals here, it is the organising of elections. More people vote in Dharavi than in many privileged neighbourhoods of Mumbai.[6]

Urbanisation, says Debord, breaks local autonomy only to separate people and communities along functional lines. Shifting residents from their houses to high-rise buildings means disconnecting them from their tools of production and the street economy. What has rooted Dharavi in the city is its 80+ nagars, each with its own sense of independence, local identity, shared economic practices and connections to the villages they migrated from and keep returning to every year. These industrious neighbourhoods, with their rural roots, small-producers and communitarian ethos, are urban avatars of Gandhi's idealised vision of the village.[7]

Dharavi's cosmopolitanism and urbanity comes alive in its infinite number of streets and gullies, which serve as public space and marketplace. As we have written elsewhere[8]: In neighbourhoods such as Dharavi in Mumbai, where any space is currency, designated public space is virtually non-existent but the spirit of the public infuses every nook and corner. Crowded streets become collective spaces during festivals; temples and shrines become either thoroughfares or meeting points; they remain oases of calm or contribute to the general din.

A layer of public-ness settles onto traffic-infested streets when collective prayer has to happen and for that one moment waves of urban chaos freeze and allow for that incredible flash of community to manifest itself before crashing back into their usual stormy selves a few minutes later. Streets are typically used simultaneously as a playground by kids, as sales points by a street vendor, as pedestrian links to the train station as well as meeting places for residents, drying spaces for clothes and advertising spaces for movies and recruitment agencies. This is how Dharavi's multitude comes together. Ignoring it is what makes its planned redevelopment so destructive.

---

16. Guy Debord, La Société du Spectacle (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

There is nothing wrong with reconstruction, as long as the residents and their histories are part of it. In the context of Dharavi, what needs to be preserved is not individual houses but the ability of residents to improve their living space – a know-how embedded in the way people here relate to their environment. Demolition without preservation, especially when it is institutionalised and normalised through state machinery and entrenched social prejudice, can create bitterness and resentment of the most destructive kind.

The fifteenth-century architect Leon Battista Alberti condemned demolition as an act of extraordinary savagery – a crime and a violation of fundamental rights. The root cause of most demolitions, he said, was the architect's inability to build without eliminating everything already on the site. For Alberti, demolition showed a disrespect for the efforts of previous human generations, whereas preservation permitted the collective development of a more humane environment. [17]

When homegrown neighbourhoods like Dharavi are disempowered, erased and ultimately replaced with totally different urban forms and spatial organisation, it is the whole city that loses out on their potential. The 'redevelopment' of Dharavi would sweep away one of the most open, inclusive and upwardly mobile parts of the city for the sake of an exclusive and privileged real-estate project. The impressively dynamic industrial base of Dharavi and its ever-evolving urban morphology

Photograph - Julien Gregorio

would disappear, and a majority of its dwellers would be pushed back to the city's edge, forced to start all over again from zero. Thus, instead of clearing a slum, the redevelopment project would actually generate more slums, more poverty.

According to Debord, social emancipation requires the appropriation, not just of the means of production, but also of our own history. Yet the ongoing process of urbanisation in Mumbai and the world at large is one that erases as much as it builds. It negates the city because it deprives neighbourhoods of the chance of reproducing and reinventing themselves.

The idea that development must follow a linear trajectory from the village to the slum to the 'modern city' is plainly wrong. Particularly if by 'modern' we mean a certain form of urbanisation characterised by high-rise buildings and large motorways. This 'modern city' is in fact a false kind of urbanisation. What makes a city a city is the people that inhabit it and the way they interact with their environment, making it their own, constantly balancing between their history and their needs and aspirations, both individual and collective. The city is reproduced every day through the million social or commercial interactions that tie people together, and that are enmeshed at many levels in the city's economy, fabric and ethos. The city should therefore not be understood as a counterpoint to the village, or as the place that ends where farmland begins. The city ends when its inhabitants can no longer communicate with each other or interact with the world around them.

Just as the title of this essay suggests, the slum was never where it was thought to be. The slum is being produced just as we speak, not by poor migrants building the next Dharavis but everywhere around it, in the form of an unsustainable, one-size-fits-all model of urbanisation that is devoid of imagination and systematically denies user involvement. When we have to go from a security checkpoint to the highway, from underground parking to high-rise shopping and dwelling, when the street stops being alive and walkable, then we know it is time to head to those parts of the city where feeling safe means being surrounded by people with whom we can interact in the most spontaneous way. This – and not high fences and barbed wire – is a marker of development and civility, and it happens in places like Dharavi which have grown to become neighbourhoods with their own special character. And there is definitely no place for a slum inside them.

---

17. In an essay on demolition in architecture, anthropologist Françoise Choay gives the example of Japan, where Shintosit temples are rebuilt every 20 years. The reconstruction is an opportunity to evolve, perfect and pass on traditions to the future generation. It constantly generates innovations. Ancient construction crafts and techniques have not only been preserved in Japan, they have also spread beyond sacred spaces into the city. For instance, masons with ancestral knowledge are still building millions of small homes in Tokyo.

Photograph - Julien Gregorio

urbz

Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava co-founded
urbz, an experimental action and research collective
specialized in urban participatory planning, design and
governance. They are also co-founders of the Institute
of Urbanology, which contributes to the debate on
urbanization by creating and diffusing new concepts
and ideas.

contact@urbz.net
urbz.net