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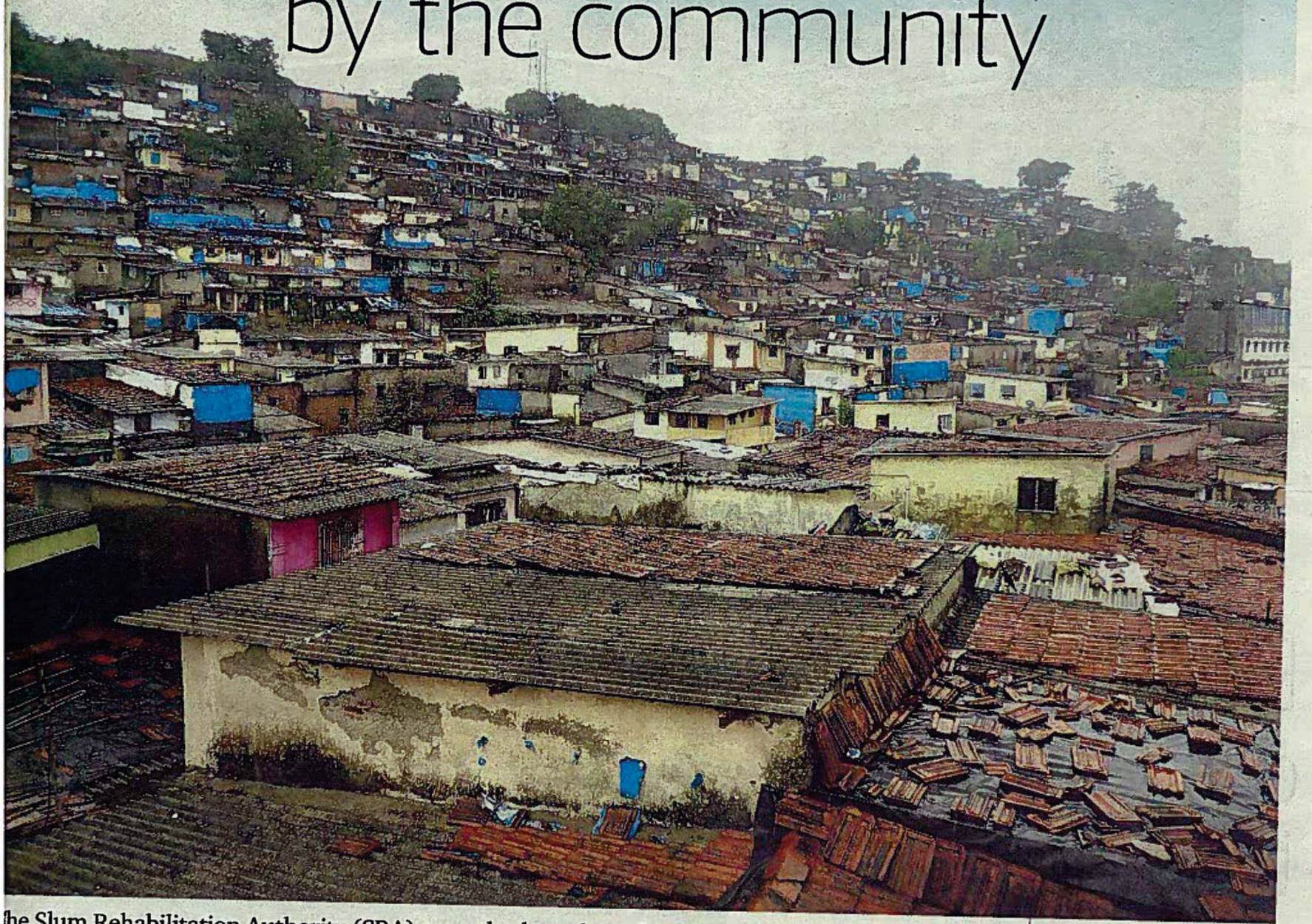
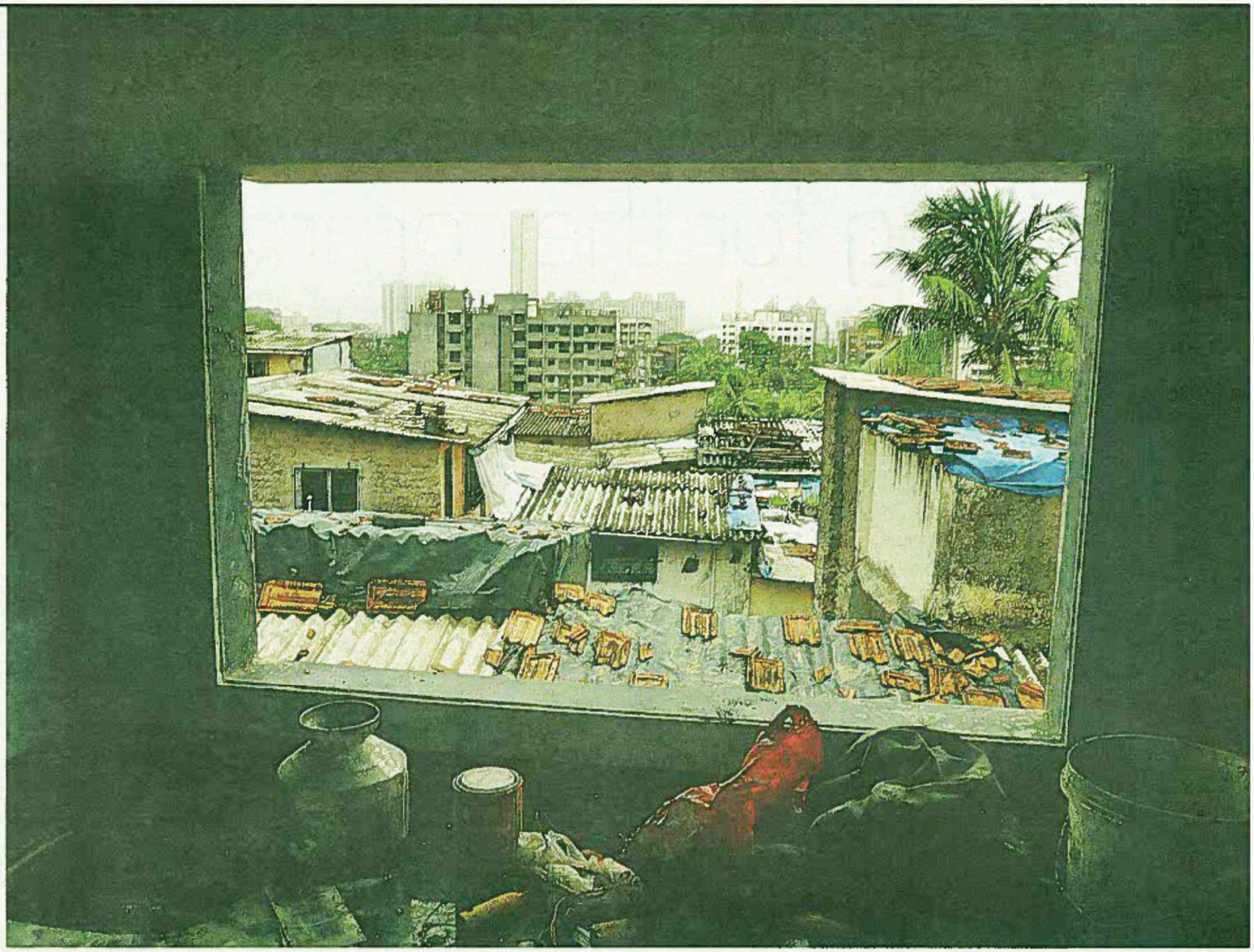
Building for the community, by the community



he Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) recently cleared another plan to build 26 skyscrapers to ouse slumdwellers from Malad and Parel. But URBZ, a group of urban planners, feels vertical ehabilitation is not the best solution. Through their Homegrown Cities Project (HCP), the group as now teamed up with local contractors to build sustainable settlements and set up a o-operative housing society encompassing what is officially deemed a slum area. IOEENA HALIM finds out more about their pilot project in Bhandup, and their other plans

An aerial view of Utkarsh Nagar at Bhandup that has expanded rapidly in the past decade as many families from the Konkan coast have made it their home. The slum is a vibrant homegrown neighbourhood with a strong cultural identity. PIC/ URBZ



Officially 85 per cent of Bhandup is classified as slums. PICS/ URBZ

Building for the community, by the community

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

According to the state Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), slumdwellers live in colonies simply because there is no alternative.

The government authority's solution is conventional, for the lack of a better word: redevelopment. But as Srivastava points out, "growing vertically may not always be the answer." So what's the alternative?

An alternative solution

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

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

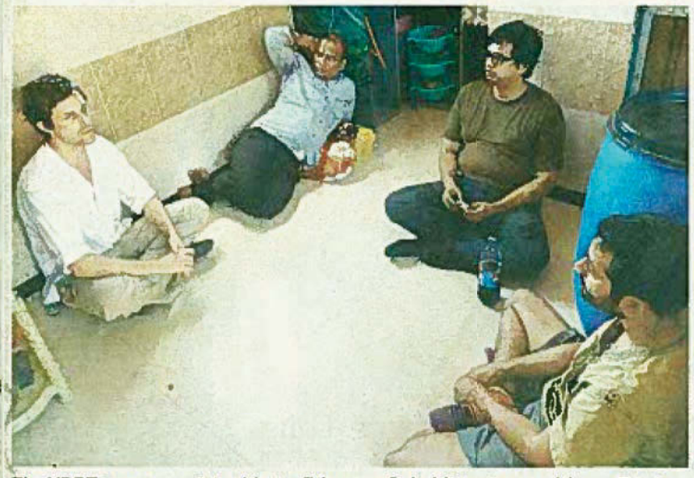
Crowdfunding

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

Who needs a highrise?

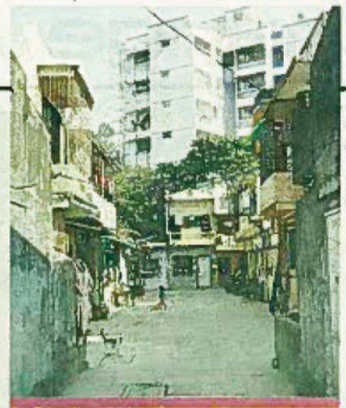
But isn't it practical to build a high-rise tower when it comes to accommodating residents of a slum? The URBZ team thinks not. Rather than razing existing structures and erecting a new building, the project aims to sustain the existing mo Their intention is to slowly reno or rebuilt all the houses in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

"We want to support the com nity's good practices and h improve construction. It is impera that we recognise that local const tion is not equivalent to construction. It doesn't always hav be about 'fixing it'," says Echan "There are several 'homegro neighbourhoods, including Dhar Koliwada, Shivaji Na Bainganwadi, Paspoli, and Saki Na These are all pretty efficiently b They aren't merely residential, also include shops and small b nesses. Demolishing these sh would mean destroying local ec my. We're not being romantic abo and saying there are no problem all, but there is certainly no poin flattening a settlement blindly destroying what works well for community," adds the urban plan a PhD candidate at the Universit



The URBZ team comprising Matias Echanove, Rahul Srivastava and Aaron Pereira brainstorms with local contractor Amar Mirjankar (second from left)

Two houses, built by contractor Amar Mirjankar, who will help the URBZ team with their pilot project



From progressive policies to swelling slums

ONE of the inspirations for the Homegrown Cities Project comes from a sites and services project that was implemented by MHADA in association with the World Bank in the 1980s. "These projects were based on the belief that users were capable of generating their own habitats. All they needed was a well designed template, which served as a starting point for incremental development. You can still see one such locality in Charkop, which has grown into a pleasant, lower-middle class neighbourhood," says Echanove. "By the mid-1990s, however, these progressive schemes were discontinued because the government realised that BMC land was being used and they were losing precious votes," adds Srivastava. "The joke is that they continue to give subsidies all the time, just not to the poor. Thanks to local bureaucracy, 'public-private' schemes were introduced, which encouraged high-rise redevelopment projects, and subsequently only added to the city's woes. Since the SRA was set up, the number of slums has only increased."

Tokyo and a doctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute of the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

Besides, taller buildings don't necessarily house more people. "The general idea is that a high-rise helps accommodate more people is completely erroneous. Look at South Mumbai – it has the most high-rises in Mumbai, and a relatively smaller population," Echanove smiles. "The SRA might intend to accommodate more people by rehabilitating them to a tall building, but the vertical logic isn't so straightforward," believes Srivastava. While constructing buildings, space is used differently, Srivastava explains. Where parking space and driveways eat into a modern urban construction, the traditional lanes in an informal settlement, which don't accommodate cars, allow a lot more living space.

Power to the people

So, instead of commissioning an architect to plan a 'solution' for slum dwellers, HCP will rely mainly on the expertise of local contractors. "If I've learnt one thing after working in these neighbourhoods, it's that trust is the most important factor. And these contractors tend to have a great relationship with their clients. They're more like agents – they fix every problem that comes in the way. They maintain a rapport with their clients and don't just disappear after they finish construction," notes Echanove. The architects, engineers and designers on the team will work in conjunction with these contractors.

"Any architect who has studied the science will learn about large developments. But we are hands-on learners. We know all there is to know about smaller developments," says Irfan Divate, who has been working with the URBZ team in Bainganwadi, Shivaji Nagar. "But I agree, that both dealing with space and coming up with the best design are equally important," he says.

"There is a huge scope for improvement in terms of construction," agrees Echanove, "And the contractors are always very open to learning. What we aim for is co-creation." Amar Mirjankar, for instance, who has worked as a contractor since he was 14, is going to help the team with their Bhandup project. Like most other successful local contractors, Mirjankar's political clout takes the pressure off the complicated business of construction in the area. In Bhandup alone, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) member has worked on about 200 houses. "I used to get work on 60-70 houses a year. But the SRA scheme has affected my business. People are worried about the authority demolishing their houses to erect a building. They don't want to spend their savings on constructing a new house," says Mirjankar.

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

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

Replicating the democratic model

Provided the pilot project achieves a certain amount of success, URBZ would like to initiate similar projects in other neighbourhoods. "We'd like to showcase this as an alternative to SRA schemes," says Echanove, adding that their only attempt at pitching the idea to a government official got them little attention. "But Bhandup is a good place to begin. It is a great example of how residents have built their own little neighbourhood. We hope that our success will attract more interest in the project," he adds.

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

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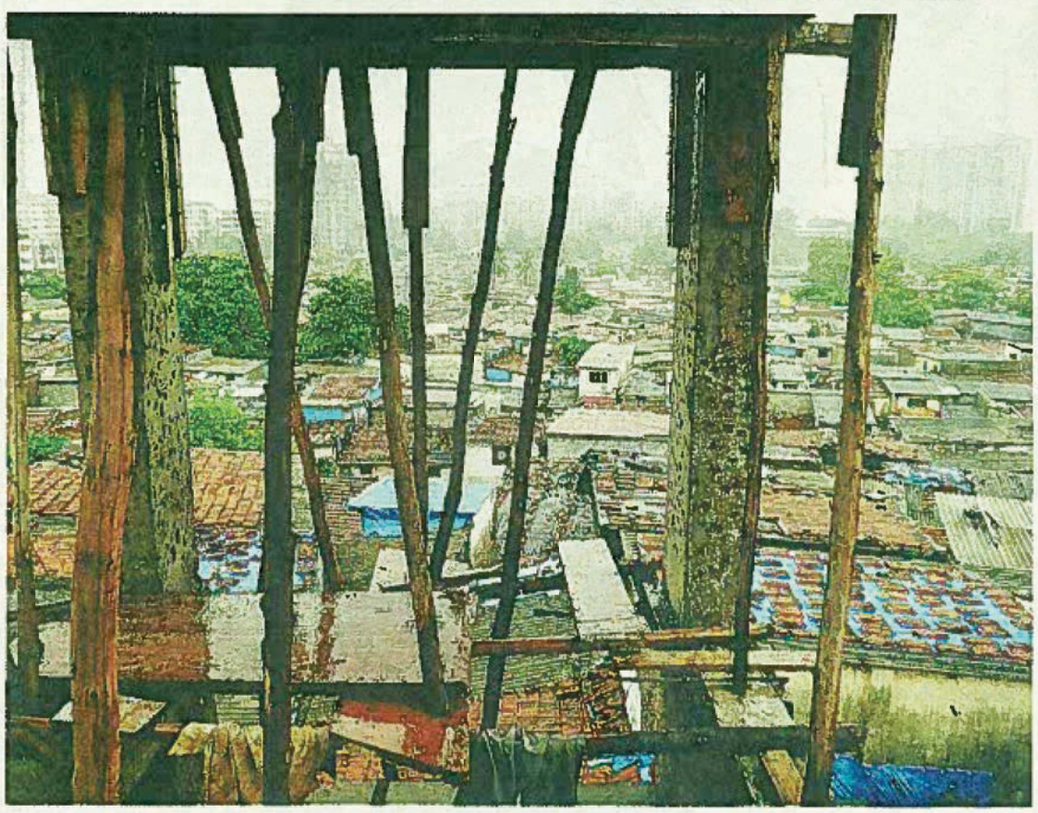

View from a construction site at Utkarsh Nagar, Bhandup