



move!

Prose & Poetry on Dharavi and the City

abhay narasimhan

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About The Author:

Abhay Narasimhan is a student of Architecture at the University of Southern California and is interested in exploring alternative spatial systems through the lens of architecture, urbanism, and sociology.

He is curious about everyday magical and political acts, and how they might transcend impositions of hierarchical order.

His previous written works deal with the IT-led growth in his home city of Bengaluru and its impact on housing types within the city.

About *urbz*:

Founded in 2008 in Dharavi, Mumbai by Rahul Srivastava and Matias Echanove. It is a global collective of urban researchers and practitioners based in Mumbai, Geneva and Bogota. The partnership is dedicated to urban planning, design and research in fields relating to urbanism, anthropology, economic development and mobility.

The work of *urbz* has strived to emphasize the importance of people centred design, the value of co-creation at the neighbourhood level, the significance of civic participation in planning processes and the idea that a range of different skills are part of the urban processes beyond architecture and planning - this includes social anthropology, engineering, studies of local economies, mobility and creative practices.

Off Sangam Galli, Dharavi



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For urbz, and my loved ones

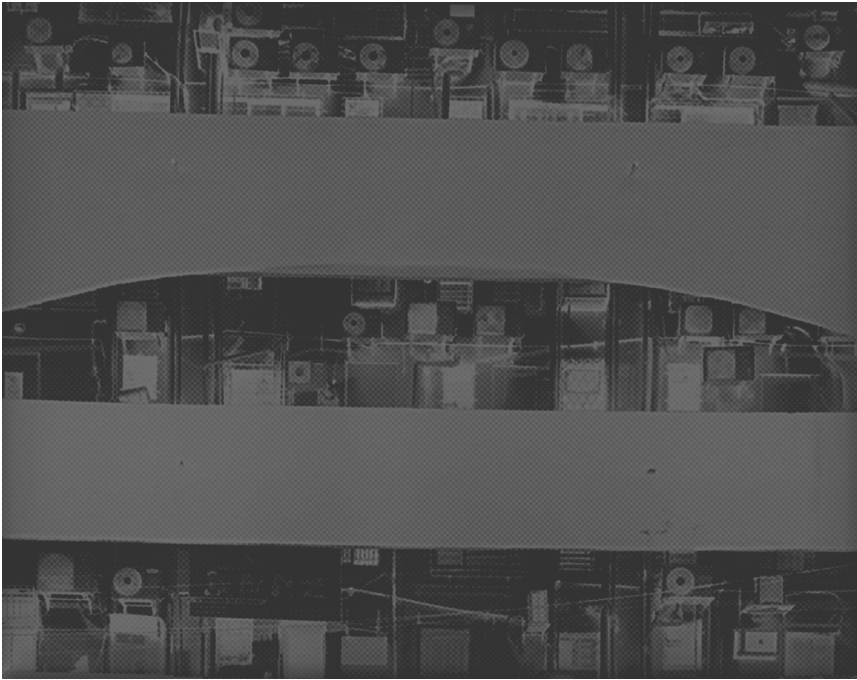


Reay Road, Ghodapdeo Modi Compound

The city contradicts itself, and so do I.

In the scalding summer months, when the soap is hot, and even metals' minds muddle. Cold taps spout uneasily hot water, and the hot one thankfully conjures cool water.

What is there to do but to take short baths frequently and think long and hard between them?



Array of Air Conditioner Exhausts

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INTRODUCTION

This compilation of prose and poetry emerges from the most incredible time spent in Dharavi working with *urbz* Mumbai.

My first experiences of Dharavi were characterised by observations of chaos. There were things I couldn't give order to, couldn't classify, and place within contexts. I came to *urbz* because it was in Dharavi, and I could come here and learn from it. It struck me as a real place, formed by creative practices that were responding to "real" needs, on essential things. Entirely toward social and physical well-being. But to even form a concise description such as this fails Dharavi, exactly as my preconceptions did. To simplify things, I have found, does no good in the city. Dharavi and the city represent a multitudinous world more than "basic" longings. I was reminded then by the words of James Scott, who did quite well to describe my behaviour.

1 *Society must be remade before it can be the object of quantification. Categories of people and things must be defined, measures must be interchangeable; land and commodities must be conceived as represented by an equivalent in money. There is much of what Weber called rationalization in this. And a good deal of centralization.*

Same way, the natural world is too hard to put into schemes and numbers, so is the world of social relations. No administrative system is capable of representing any existing social community except through a heroic and greatly schematized process of abstraction and simplification. (Seeing like a state, James C Scott)

Rahul Srivastava and Matias Echanove argue that the "coming together of administrative control and financial power leaves little scope for local populations to plan and manage their habitats." Within this framework, in which the state pursues ideals of efficiency and order to facilitate private capital, Dharavi embodies a divergence from this technocratic paradigm.

In a system that desperately seeks to rationalise, with square corners and straight lines, I have found that Dharavi instead breaks many of these socio-spatial conventions. It is swirling with magic, not the Aladdin's genie kind but other local types that one encounters only when they spend time here. Square rooms with curving walls. Trees that grow on doorways and lay their roots indoors. Stairways, entrances and arcades, made decisively inert by architectural discourse, are as Rahul and Matias say, "full of unanticipated activity." What I would otherwise treat as "objects", or "spaces" came alive, dealing in confusions and illusions.

The unexplainable, the magical and the supernatural arose from an instinctive reaction to make sense of the sheer overwhelming of the senses. I found that modern scientific thought, in its totalizing incarnations, fails in addressing many of the body's and mind's needs and desires. Here, I have encountered countless instances of local beliefs, habits, and customs that elude modernist, scientific epistemologies.

So far, I have hinted at the few resistant behaviours of Dharavi. A reading of *Homegrown Cities* by Rahul Srivastava and Matias Echanove explained so much to me and helped me immensely. For now, I have built a vocabulary, enough to ask questions at the very least.

Is it really "resistance", or rather "enablement"? Or is it both? and which of these framings allow for the dismantling of historical forms of discrimination, on the basis of caste, religion, and class? urbz, having worked on the subject for nearly two decades now, emphasises the incrementality that is central to the enablement that Dharavi creates. In opposition to the language of instantaneous growth and rapid development that neoliberalism expects and engenders, incremental growth begins to shift the terms and return agency to Dharavi's residents. Rahul and Mathias emphasise that "use value of space cannot simply be equated to its exchange value. Use value derives from the way people


inhabit space, generate relationships within it, develop it to serve their needs, and beautify it as they make their own.” We can infer that **through collective ownership, use value exceeds speculative-exchange value.**

Perhaps, then, the abstractions that James Scott refers to, of land as money, are rendered far weaker and far less simplified than in other sections of the city.

Moreover, the ideology of capitalism brings with it, like a dog on a leash, the capitalist projection of socialism, which places collective identities and growth in opposition to each other. That, in a socialist framework, the individual is made anonymous. Here again, Dharavi resists these notions. In every festive dance, in everyday conversations, in every meal and in every artisan’s craft, it shows us that individualism is simply inherent to interdependence.



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I have a set of working eyes, one good ear and another half-decent one, a semi-blocked nose, and a mouth that is entirely a slave to my stomach. That said, I was possessed, even as a child, by a terrible restlessness. Harnessing this energetic affliction, I walked the gullies of Dharavi and documented the ways in which it returns agency to the “walker”. When I was not walking, my mind would race in response to the imbalance. My various movements in Mumbai, and in Dharavi have stimulated copious amounts of fantasy and magic, and churned out, in response to the pervading dust, spitballs of philosophical drivel. I invite you to live in the dream with me. To live in the  city.



i. NAME PLACE ANIMAL THING

I begin my pilgrimage every morning at 9:13 AM. I cross NS Road 10 to the bus stop, which is conveniently across the street and visible from my bedroom window. It's silly that I can see when I'm running late; the bus pauses momentarily for the few passengers who begin their day with me. "You can make it too!" says the bus, stalled in the morning traffic. And for three whole seconds, I believe. I rush out with a backpack and toasted bread (lathered with copious amounts of peanut butter) in my hand. And as soon as I'm...Who am I kidding? Bombay buses wait for no one.

And there are days when I make it—the 255 to Pratiksha Nagar. Be there at 9:06; the bus can be there anytime between then and 9:20. 'Getting on the bus' is also incredibly stressful; you barely get a second. Luckily, the driver is a master, and the back entrance aligns perfectly with you. My Bengaluru-bred expectation of empathy (or apathy, whatever you want to call it) was shown the door on my first day, when my body was only half in, and the bus lurched forward into what felt like its maximum speed. I was holding onto a pole for support, but my grip wasn't firm enough. I crashed into the closest seat while the other passengers smirked in amusement, which seems to happen more often than I'd like.

Then my body dissolves into the seat, reduced to being the nonfunctional appendix of this thunderous creature for the best part of the next hour. Or more so, an unused contrabassoon in a neo-baroque-grunge travelling orchestra. Banshee Screech, Shudder-Shudder, and Halting Whistle are only a few from an illustrious discography. The conductor is a clean-shaven young man with a striking silver hoop in his right ear. His hair - a slicked top, faded to its sides - is stylish, as per the mode. He wears thick black bands on each wrist, and the regular bus-brown overalls fit him perfectly, transcending their classification as a 'uniform'. The driver himself is the leading act, an ill-tempered man who fails to go a day without getting into some sort of ruckus, shouting matches with innocent pedestrians, and,

oddly, anyone who tries to get on from the front entrance. The bus comes only once every half an hour. If you hope to depend on it for daily use, behave well in front of Driver Sahab.

And soon, I became acquainted with the whole band of pilgrims that makes the daily journey south with me. They are only normal people, who I'm sure were once as unquiet as I was. We sometimes offer each other friendly nods that acknowledge the madness all around us, and our divergent faiths in things we must do that lie in the same direction. We understand also, that the game is starting. Get a seat quickly, otherwise you might miss your chance to dream, your chance to play Name, Place, Animal, Thing.

There goes by People, people and people. The beach, and with it, a sign that tells me I love it. Soho House, the Theosophical Society, and some other interesting homes, all reclusively wealthy. The ocean-air is thick and meady, that my senses become muddled, so that I can taste the breezes, hear the cream-yellow sand, and see the roar-hush-roar of the waves. But these idle romanticizations are instantly overcome by the swarming of Juhu beach lovers, making it easy for me to battle a state of hypnosis-by-humidification. We bus-folk notice together the enormous billboard of Deepika advertising some brand of drinking water or another. And we know now that we are getting onto S.V. Road. This simile street, of a thousand signage boards and advertisements, stretches far in the material world, but dampens imaginations. Every see-er of these billboards knows precisely what they are; the malleable, yet relatively consistent translation from signifier to the quality of signified is a code available to those initiated by the city. Who is really thinking anymore that Deepika's choice of bottled water is better than any other? I guess the product is no longer the bottle, or any romantic dream, but companies fighting for space in our fields of vision. Even the sky is no limit for them.

9:50 AM, S.V. Road. Near Bandra and Hill Road.

Here comes the ridiculous running man. I see him in oblique, with a large frame and black, freyed hair, wearing bathroom chappals, with an assured gait and running speed. On first impression, I thought it was an emergency; why else would someone look like they'd immediately begun running post their morning ablutions? But I see him now and then, overtaking the traffic-slow bus, undeterred by the currents of motorbikes and autorickshaws that spill into the threshold that is the sliver of the left lane - a convention in Mumbai I later learned. I can think of a million other pleasant places to run, why here? Pff, the things people do to stay fit these days. Suddenly, he escapes into a quieter Bandra Road, slowing down a little further, and swinging open a rusted metal gate into a fading-white, sea-darkened apartment. He climbs the dim slate-grey stairwell illuminated only by a pocket Jali, shadowed anyway by a taller apartment. His roommates leave earlier, for work in some vanity-related showbiz agency, taking with them the mind-numbing chirpings of which actor's getting what body part 'fixed' and whose movie's going to flop. The space, now, sanctified again for those few moments of the morning when real birdsong and trees whisper to each other. When he stumbles back into his two-bedroom shared by four, his hands stay clammy with an indissoluble concoction of ocean spray and perspirations. And so he leaves his earphones in, bass-heavy film-pop enveloping the insides of his head. Tum dum, tum dum, enchanted by the pulsing tune, his physical faculties become a stand-in for various instruments. The edge of his knuckles wraps the rhythm into the side of his skull. Tum dum, tum dum, followed by repugnant hooting. I emerge from the diluted ink, perfectly aware of where I am.

Even the incessant wing flaps are an ugly, noisy mess. The 'Kabootarein' (Pigeons) of Bandra Talao (Pond). Many have yearned to rediscover Adam's

lost language, wherein word and object possess, between them, a primordial affinity. Look no further for a word for these winged annoyances.

Kabootarein throng in the hundreds, pecking away at part-insect part-microplastic worms exposed en plein air from the broken tiles. We are all undergoing a metamorphosis of a similar kind, turning into such plasticocyborgs of our own making. Soon enough, we will be scrambling for plastic lungs and stomachs that can handle their chemical kind far better than the ones we were born with, that is, of blood and tissue. They can stretch and twist for the monoxides, sulphates, and all sorts. The chemical composition of this world is changing. Yes and...

Bottles and other polymers fracture the simulacrum of what might be a magnificent jade mirror. The deep algal shade of the pond reflects a brilliant Bandra sky. The tank grounds are always busy this time of day. Are people really that captivated by this absolute conquest of nature? For a tank has been shaped, filled, and, over time, coloured by us. Or is the allure instead, a return to nature's teasing, unconquerable mess? Very few places offer solitude and sobriety from the intoxication by plastic faces contorted differently for different prices. Here, there are no posters of Barbie women and Ken men who idealise snow-white skin tones. Who even wanted them in the first place? But this magic mirror resting on earth reflects the sky, the same sky that causes darkness of skin and strength of bone.

Thwack, my phone hits the bus floor on the flat of its face. A sign for me to shake myself out of this overbearing, preachy, philosophical drivel. I'm sorry, doing nothing lets me get carried away.

Mirror shops, mirror-frame shops, chairs-to-sit-in-front-of-mirrors shops. I see the picturesque, bone-white facade of the Jama masjid. Boys and

Choo-Choo, the bus chugs on, neck-stretched, my gaze foolishly left behind in admiration of the exquisite craftsmanship of the mosque front. Aging so gracefully, the wooden details - white protruding supports - form a rich texture from underneath the shadowed eaves. And from these charred edges, escape an auburn gradient, confessing to the deception of whiteness that derives from the mind's laziest attribution of colour. Almost there! I speculate how late I will be to the office. Only a traffic signal and the shadow spilling onto us from the immense opacity of an overhead flyover separates us and the great expanse of South Mumbai. Supporting two-metre-wide piers are painted a ghastly green-blue, like some new-fangled ice cream flavour. Here again, there are kabootar, occupying a realm far above, of the underside of the flyover, staring at the stupid spikes that are placed a story too low. I, too, had once been a first-time pilgrim, and I stared eagerly at the maps on my phone, tracking when I had to get off. Only a stop away, I had thought.

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But, Driver Sahab has different ideas. The entire bus swivels left and gets onto the flyover, leaving the non-daily pilgrims confused. What happens then is the bus takes a 2-kilometre detour, returns to a spot 50 metres ahead of the flyover, and during these 10 minutes, no one gets on or off. An absolutely infuriating twist in the tale. Once, someone got off before the flyover and got back on after it. Unexplainable things cause silly, unexplainable things, and this mysterious geoid keeps tumbling over itself.

The bus gives me just enough height above the road to peek over the flyover wall separating nothing from something. But I know what is there in its entirety from other auto rides back home to Juhu and such. The city is nothing without trust in adjacencies, that there is always something beyond the threshold of what is immediately visible. The swamp-like mangrove river, the Mithi, that floats into the magnificent infinity.

men donning white kurtas, likely entering or exiting the Madrasa. And maybe it is vital to this magnificence that it was borne from this dirty mouth.

For a while, the uninterrupted overlook of the polluted river became interrupted by street billboards of the visiting French president, alternating with images of our own Prime Minister. To signal the coming of favourable trade agreements between India and the European Union. And the hot stench of once Mithi, now sewage-sweet air, wafts from the spaces in between, forcing me to breathe from my mouth. A mistake, now that I could taste it, a saccharine overdose from amateur macaroons and ill-formed orange jalebis.

In the distance, lie the stacked houses, put together from corrugated sheets and cloth. The Mumbai of the UN and all those other NGOs. And looming over these settlements are monstrous modernist towers, a swirling spire of greed, disguised in white paint and white lies. An adjacent billboard names the - shall-not-be-named - realty, prophesying incoming violence and destruction. The one with a withering heart and a hole in the middle, hoping to conquer a super one. I really wish nothing but ill on that soulless scumbag.

10

10:25 AM Sion-Bandra Link Road

There is a kind of finality about the Dharavi T-Junction, where only a left or right is possible for the big boys (large vehicles). I got off the bus, as it stopped, on the road itself. There is a little island in this bifurcating river. Where auto rickshaws pass no more, it becomes too south for these fishies. The water is too salty for these river dwellers. I have heard the artisans say that Dharavi is the beating heart of Mumbai. I can say it no better.



Sculpture in a Landfill

ii. EAT ME, DRINK ME

Swirling with magic and swelling with illusion
A banyan tree and a mosque

Veiled women giggle on Friday Mornings
Kittens and children play with their mothers

One hand, and a stub for the other
The Tiffen-Carrier-Man rocks from side to side,
100 metal containers rest on his shoulder-bone,
far outweighing his thin muscles and wiry frame.

Fabrics produced en masse
Denim, blue cloth, and black cloth

Cats lie beside, laze on tables of vegetable,
spices, garlic, jewelry, flowers, and drums
Of everyday festivities

Fish shops with pretty small fish in glass aquariums
Big fish eat small fish,
retribution at the hands of the butcher

Shrunk money sprawled across the road, interesting no one,
Money buys, but it doesn't sell

Ere concrete softens
And turns to earth by the spilled pani (of the pani-puri-wala)

The Tiffen-Carrier-Man rocks from side to side

He is going the same way
100 metal boxes stacked diagonally
Sidewalls twist out of the way

A rat, snarling, crouched over a packet of chips
Marking her territory

Fur until her shoulders
Above, a clump of decaying grey skin

Bitterness embodied
Whispering spells into the crackles of the plastic packet

Rats unafraid
because the cat has grown up with rats around,
And killing them always would not constitute good manners

And the dog has always seen the cat around,
They are childhood friends

And the old man has always seen dogs,
And he has become one,

sitting near the fresh puri stalls waiting for his turn,
In the meantime, observing

The rhythm of the street
The Tiffen-Carrier-Man rocks from side to side
Am I Alice in Koliwada?

He leads me near Khambadev's temple
Middle-aged women stand eagerly in faith

Milk is poured on exposed basalt rock
Worshipped
Canines bow in faith, too

The deity emerges from the earth
Kites are flown
Black polythene covers dance the sea wind's jig

Kids sneaking cigarettes
Turned soothsayers
Disconcerted by the melody of the present

Anachronisms are entities of discomfort
Our lives, fixed as thresholds
By objects from futures and pasts

Memories here are fictions
But things have only happened in these memories

Visions of Khambadev
The basalt rock from the river
And sea

Are you a memory or a projection
The Tiffen-Carrier-Man rocks from side to side





I began my internship with urbz in the second week of the New Year, and by the end of the third week, I was given my first solo mission. I left the urbz office a quarter past noon to submit measurements of a chair to Dutta Koli, a fisherman turned metal fabricator. The chair itself was for a study space in Koliwada. I'd been to his workshop before, albeit not alone, but I was sure I could find it. Alone this time. My [over]confidence soared, and I embarked with the fury of an empire. If "England knows Egypt; Egypt is what England knows" (Said 1978, 32), then Koliwada was what I must know. I didn't allow myself any crutches, no phones, nothing. Why not? After all, I've been taught to think like an architect. Easy! The mystery of this 'maze' must surely dissolve when conceived simply as figure and ground. I'd remembered studying Koliwada's survey drawings on my first day. It was possible to memorise a key - left, right, right, left, keep straight, and so on. Anyway, no need of all this overcomplicating. My ability to visualise space as orthographic drawing should make this a cakewalk.

17

I crossed the main road into the gully that I knew would take me to the workshop. I heard a hiss and the following splatter of oil, pausing momentarily in caution. A square portal finished with a white marble veneer framed snacks being fried in large cauldrons. I took another step, and was engulfed by a thick cloud of grey fumes that smelled like they were "porchifying" (deep-frying) Vadas, and guessed that this was likely a Tamil-run shop. I squinted, and through the inky haze were the makings of thick, golden-brown rings of delight. Only the very next instant, I was exposed to another intoxicating, yet pungent smell, of very many onions and spices. My uninitiated nose retreated to ignorance and only identified this as some "Marathi" light-bite. "Pay no heed to these, I know the way," I thought to myself, remaining steadfast. I followed the meanderings of this gully for a while; my body's compass urged me to follow my Cartesian 10 o'clock. Left, right, keep left. Along the way, I'd see many people watching me - amused. I don't think they were really bothered by how I looked or

dressed; it was more the nature of my stride, I think. “This guy must be lost”, and there was always a softness that followed, making it only easier to ask for directions, and relieving me of the social burden of interrupting someone’s day. For whatever reason, I resisted these well-intentioned social cues and carried on. I came upon an open square, surrounded on all four sides by homes of many sizes, with brilliant colour and texture. A melange of metals, cement, and earth; of beams, walls, and wire. To the furthest-right corner of the square, a half-white, half-brown cat sat perched on a metal step ladder. He looked at me curiously, “Why is this foolish young man with a loosely-tucked checked shirt and charcoal pants wandering like so?” he must’ve thought, and so must’ve everybody else who saw me. But a cat’s interest is lost quickly, and he looked away to his right, probably toward one of those rodents that dart through the drains and pipes.

I took the gully to my near-left, and entered increasingly unfamiliar territory. Even my ego began to relinquish its control over my mind. I felt faintly the urge to use the map on my phone. Once again, I made a confused turn into a gully with wires drooping to knee-height like the roots of a banyan tree. At the end of this gully, a portal of blinding white light struck me. My eyes adjusted themselves, and identified traces of a few metal frames and members, and I heard also the faint buzz of machinic movements. Surely, this must be it. And as I got closer, the whining and whirring of metalwork and motors grew formidably. Aha, I’ve done it. As usual. I stepped through this imaginary doorway with my chest out. Phthew, I was spat out onto the Dharavi main road like a stuck-in-your-mouth fly.

I had yearned to know Koliwada’s spatial lingo, but even a fool knows that knowing a language takes time and necessitates a surrendering to its will. was an intruder in its midst. I shook my head from side to side, acting out my frustration. I had somewhere to be and lunch to get back

in time for. I turned back with renewed vigour, only increasing my pace. I walked past the cat this time; he looked at me with the same curiosity, but this time there was also disdain and an “I told you so” embedded in those protruding, oversized spheroids. Suddenly, the entire place became yellow, with light bouncing, dancing even, across each of the brightly painted walls, perhaps produced with such an effect in mind. It’s beautiful and surreal to see. The brilliant shade of amber even colours the insides of your eyes, if there is such a place. And there is an amber-filter one is left with, long after they leave the yellow place. This is a kind of thing that is only reminiscent of Goa or some other faraway place that lies along the Mediterranean Sea (such are the recollections of my urban-elite mind). Anyway, I recognised this place, I’d crossed this on the way to the welders’ workshop last time. How can one forget a place like this?

19

Soon, the practicality of remembrance was set in stone. I circled back in annoyance at least a handful of times to set my way out from there. My arrogance had been blown to bits. I remembered only 30 minutes before I’d said, “Don’t worry, I can go myself.”

I found myself in one of the many dimly-lit gullies feeding into a square courtyard, cooled by the water running along the open drains. I stood silently, my face likely conveying a pathetic defeat. A woman holding her baby paced near her home, waiting for me to ask for help. “Welder kidhar hai?” I said in a humiliation-worthy pronunciation of Hindi. There was also an attempt to overlay my recent exposure to Marathi pronunciations, but the ‘W’ failed to even leave my lips. She understood nonetheless, and gestured “Udhar” to what looked like a dead-end in the darkness. I walked to the end to see a small opening to its right with gusts of hot air spilling into this intersection from an exhaust fan. I hopped away, which began a tip-toeing frenzy that saw me skate across the rocking drain covers. The momentary jig filled me with a childish thrill. And soon, I started to give

in to the swaying and swinging of my body. Which of the many rights or lefts to take, my knees would momentarily brace and pivot, my hips would shear impulsively because my nose remembered these smells, my eyes the objects and light-patterns, and my ears the sounds. The ego-ridden part of me was laid to rest in an euphoria-inducing sleep, and I surrendered to the rhythms of things, the qualities of the place, and its textures also. It felt like the initiation I had been waiting for, even when really I had moved only a hair's breadth away from when I had arrived on my first day.

I will spare the reader the - I finally found the workshop, etc., no one was there, etc., no one told me, etc., they'd probably gone for lunch, etc. - and say that I began a half hour earlier with the intention of experiencing the place through "divine eyes," with total knowledge. Through that ignorance, my god-given gifts were rendered useless. And yet, in all that vulnerability, getting lost in Koliwada was forgiving on my body; I was not forced to walk kilometre after kilometre to recover from wrong turns. I was only ever a few turns away from where I wanted to be. There is a comfort in knowing that.



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जामुन कलकान

SANGAM GALLI

The mind is unable to consciously piece the physical artifacts into a continuous mesh of logic. Unless magic is involved.

A cloudy day for a hot summer,
Premonition of dew monsoons

A valley, a botanist's eden
flower garlands and drying cotton t-shirts
Purple-yellow-pink-red-green-
tiring symmetry's efforts

Turn around
And one has become the other
Ah, there's the sugarcane-juice-wala
And, glittering pink, beige and pistachio-flavoured bridal costumes
I reached Sangam Galli
Kaleidoscopic

Butchers of goats, chickens, and buff
Birdhouses in box grills
Jute bags, tomatoes, ginger and onion-full
Vessels of mint, coriander and spinach, waft
Smelled before they're seen
Curries simmer in the wet breeze

General stores, ladies' chappals, Stationery shops
Busybodies contained in lucid daydreams
Realm of the instant
Exceeded, and in fiction's domain
I can make only general statements

One walks to stay in place, not to get somewhere.
Like swimming against the tide,
and climbing up a down escalator.
Or doggypadding

A camel, and walking in front, its master
Its humps were a mosaic of flannel and polka dots
Its cycling legs, greased in dark green oil
Spokes weathered by the desert 'crete
Moving drudgingly, inching slowly,
an annoyance to this fast paced galli

Peering into a foot's gap
Between a dentist and a sweet shop
A curtain of grey mist dissolved
Yellow-glowing refractions of a parisian tattoo parlour
Baroque chandeliers and rococo mirrors
Unquestionably a portal
I retreated

The galli suddenly splits into two,
of the same width as the mouth.
The threshold painted by mehendi sellers
In limited space,
a space-conjuring illusion is always welcome

Main Road again
Gashes, wounds where sunlight forgives not,
Frustrated by the fortifications of common folk.
In the summer months, the body suffers,
But in time, these gashes were redrawn, grown around
Administrative gashes often heal when the administration forgets
Organically, homegrown



Sangam Galli

SHAPESHIFTERS AND APPARITIONS

The following is an excerpt from a longer text that recounts Paarth (my fellow intern) and I's experience measuring a plot of land owned by Ramesh Koli and his family. The plot includes a house and 7 shops that face the street. The family hopes to redevelop the plot with urbz.

As you may find, our experience as architecture students, dealing mostly with conventional structures, didn't prepare us for the surfaces and shapes we would encounter on the site. Our understanding of 'space' was shattered and rebuilt every day, layered, attached, and stretched to fit a number of other dimensions not included in our curriculum.



25 **Day 1:** Our first task was to observe the site from an aerial view and register the site outline with a definition. We got this aerial perspective easily, as it was from the urbz office balcony. We understood the site's layout to consist of two distinct halves: a residential section and a commercial section. We also noticed that there was a workshop on the second floor of the home (Ramesh Koli's).

Day 2: We started with the residential half, but were unfamiliar with the home's layout. We quickly realised that this first set of measurements would only be to familiarise ourselves with the layout and structure of the house. We learned that initially, only the house was in place, and subsequently, the houses in the front were rented out to make shops. This led to the site extending immediately adjacent to the main road. Our first set of measurements were inaccurate, and our methodology for calculating lengths and diagonals was inconsistent. We used a laser tool to measure longer distances and a tape measure to calculate smaller distances. These tools are easy to use when the construction is simple and undergoes minimal change over time. This home, meanwhile, is an object of immense architectural complexity, with evolving meanings and, therefore, built

forms. What chance does a puny tape measure stand? After collecting the measurements overlaid on a previously drawn site outline (by the survey officials), we found many irregular shapes and angles that were the source of head-throbbing confusions. Later in the day, Paarth drafted a first version of the plans, and there were still many measurements that 1. Made no sense in relation to the survey drawings and 2. Made no sense in and of themselves. We thought, however, that this was a good start, and our methodology would improve over time.

Day 3: We took a jab at measuring the commercial half - 4 shops and a sliver - on the ground level. Yet again, this came with new challenges: the shops were filled to the brim with all kinds of products, packed incredibly efficiently, and there were so many movements, i.e., of the shop's customers and the shopkeeper. One of the shopkeepers, who wasn't seeing much footfall at the time, agreed to help us with the measurements. It was a clothing store filled with a wide variety of items. It was late afternoon, and a heavy lunch had made the three of us (Eesha, Paarth, and me) impatient. So many conflicting measurements. There is a narrow gully between the two central shops that produces an incredibly complex shape, with so many shifts in the walls and other architectural elements. We took down the measurements nonetheless and went back to the office, hoping for better results. It seems that 'Less is more' in the measurement-of-complex-spaces game. Our stress only increased; we had three sets of measurements that disputed each other's claims to validity, and it was highly likely that none were truly making such a claim. We had been outright inaccurate this whole time. We called it off that day and would try something different the next.

Day 4: We went to Aunty's house late in the afternoon, when the Jamaat hall was having some sort of event/function. There were many unused chairs piled up next to the hall, which is also the current entrance of

Aunty's home. I brought my laptop with me, pulled up one of the chairs, and sat down with it on my lap. Our methodology today would be to draft and measure simultaneously to ensure the success of the space's geometrical ontology. Paarth would take every measurement several times, despite the inconveniences of bending under clotheslines, reaching over jutting-out plaster, and dodging the resident cat. Paarth endured. And added to our set of tools was Paarth's mighty phone, which could now calculate the angles between the walls. More often than not, the walls are not at right angles to each other. And get this: have inconsistent angles that play cruel tricks on your mind. Paarth endured. And so did I, albeit after 2-minute bouts of transcendental laughter on recognising Paarth's bewilderment. We spent an hour measuring a 100 sq ft courtyard, taking note of every angle, every length, every diagonal, and every relation to other reference points. After many iterations, we arrived at a reasonably cohesive draft of the courtyard with accurate measurements.

But we thought it was a successful day;

27



Elevation View of Storefronts, in front of Ramesh Koli's Home (LIDAR, Rhino, Photoshop)

we had found a methodology that works.

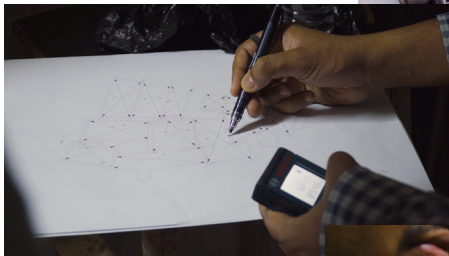
Day 5: What we call the “long-room” came next. We had previously measured this room and confidently began the measurements. It has a bed, a couple of chairs, a TV, a fish tank, and a few tables of varying sizes. It even had two cupboards that took up an entire section of the wall. Paarth measured the angle on the corner and the angle ahead of the cupboard to ensure that this straight-seeming wall was indeed so. His phone then showed us a difference of 11 degrees. No, no, this can't be real, what my eyes tell me is linear and curving so much? It must be something to do with the light. We broke up the wall into small segments, as we had done the day before. The light-green wall does magnificent things. It bends and dips simultaneously, and this change is reflected vertically as well. The fish tank refracts and disperses light, creating a fresco-like effect on the wall. In some sections, when Paarth taps the wall, crumbling plaster dust falls and brushes onto me. The biology of the wall reveals itself to us, but making it all the more incomprehensible, and I am no surgeon. This is no ordinary

28



place, I began to realise. The room is swirling with illusion. Whether you choose to believe me or discard me as some sort of wannabe magical-realist, hear what Paarth had to say about the next day. Anyway, we fumbled around for another half hour, having ended with the same progress as the day before.

I spent the weekend back home in Bengaluru, ridding myself of this Mumbai magic. I did normal things that didn't confound my relationship with reality...



Top to Bottom: Working with the LIDAR meshes on modelling software, Triangulation Attempts, Paarth measuring distances using a laser measure.

TEJAS EXPRESS FROM GOA

The lassi-chaas seller clad in company overalls and ballooning trousers. A short and plump man with a voice turned mechanically nasal from being around wailing babies, snoring uncles, unfettered nosing by idle minds, nose-blowing, phlegm-spewing sickos, and noise-complaining, nauseated, complex-ridden folk - all in this industrial wheelbox

A muscular slug of a mustache as facial hair, wiggling with the chugging of the train. He wears a cap back, like a skateboarding school kid, and most remarkably, a matching blue tray dances on the dome of his head, supported by the shimmiyings of his flattened, udon-like hair. A balancing act perfected for the train's movement.

A bald man facing forward, the folds of the back of his head formed caricatured, angry faces at me.



31

Strewn Board Game Notes, Dharavi Main Road





Boats in Koliwada Garden

GUDI PADWA

Overlooking the cetacean waste mounds

The children know that there are snakes in the grass
because they have seen one,
And that is one too many.

The twenty-something addict is semi-serpentine himself
And he has heard tales a plenty of mistaken ropes
which is simply too many

The garden of festivities,
a graveyard of defunct autorickshaws and decrepit boats,
rested on weakened keels - remnants of former fishing bliss.
A sleeping place for lonely dogs. Drunkards and canines alike.
A mosaic of broken bottles, juice cans, torn fabric, and divorced chappals.
Today is the new year, Gudi Padwa

Now there are flowers and smashed coconuts,
accompanied by sweet puris as prasad.
Children from Koliwada throng to this playground
because the ground is wide and far enough, and flat enough,
to spot missing cricket balls.
Chalk-drawn trident,
in front a batter stands in a shaded concrete deck,
surrounded on three sides by walls that the balls bounce off of,
in a plasticky frenzy.

An aunty in a hot pink kameez,
her dupatta shielding against the day's tyrannical sun.
Flower garlands and seashells drape over the front tip of the catamaran
They await the fire,
So did Shere Khan the clairvoyant,
He knew the fire would come.

'Neath the cetacean coagulations

There lies a cool blue river
Black fish, tilapia-full
Algae and plankton dance in river-rhythm
Crabs crawl, shimmy on the salted river bed
Past the sedimentary rocks,
A river of layered memory

Past the magical rocks of worship
Basalt rock, igneous rock that precedes memory
That invokes dreams of belonging
Crevices in the earth that prophesied
Long before humankind first dreamed
The rock of molten lava and the Mithi river.



Cat looking at the “Yellow Place”, Koliwada



A Dark Galli

It is easy to follow the light; it strikes you, blinds you, and you've been taught that it is pure and often beautiful. But follow darkness for a change, which is not really an absence of light but a different color altogether. In Dharavi, Darkness is found in artisans' workshops, in the corridors between homes, and in homes themselves. Darkness flows between these, too. I will urge the reader to avoid framing these darkneses as an opposition of light, or the lack thereof. That maybe these spaces are merely 'poorly lit'. Or even, they are inherently evil, awful, or whatever other social meaning we have imposed on darkness. Also, there is not just one kind of darkness; I have seen cesspools of ink, smoky dark-greys, shiny blacks, dark rainbows, and shrouded flames. All these types come attached to a whole range of social habits and meanings that I am still seeking.

Today, I am seeking out something I often come across while running errands for the office. Moments of darkness that form in many of Dharavi's interior gullies, which I avoid on most occasions. It is 8:15 on a Monday morning, an auspicious time for a capital-intensive environment. In its capacity as an economic powerhouse, Dharavi's Mondays are characterised by intense social and material movements. Here and now, duty reigns, and people fuse with their productive archetypes. Avatars of themselves, informed by their social roles. Having dropped my bag off at the office, I am left with my phone and a cup of coffee in my belly, trying to ward off the effects of the early morning.

The coffee, in its inability to improve my already-weak memory, has left my phone as my tool for note-taking and measurement, a mostly terrible mode that flattens expression, but I feel might be the least conspicuous. What's more, I embarrass easily, and from past experience, my gait screams to Dharavi's dwellers, "I AM LOST", prompting them to kindly offer directions. I want to dissolve into the background of the field instead. A kind of spectral visitor, making no attempt to affect the realities of these spaces. Although there are repercussions to that, too. Anyway, I achieve no such thing, and this piece, as you will find, makes no claims to objectivity. The weather is warm, as always. I am wearing a baggy t-shirt and loose-fitting black cotton pants. And, a pair of Crocs that suit the miniature topographies of Dharavi.



I climbed down three stories of steep steps and got out into the busy main road. Before embarking on my planned meanderings, I turned to smile at the aunty who sits on a stool beside the narrow swinging gate, selling various coloured pulses. She is a cheerful person, and when she smiles at me wholeheartedly, I know it will be a good day. A great day would mean that she offers me a handful of Channa to satiate a predisposed appreciation for finger snacks. On occasion, she is put off by haggling customers and other worries, and winces at me in acknowledgment. Thankfully, today she smiled back.

At 8:30 AM, the main road, or should I say “Men Road,” is very much a male-dominated space. With little shade for the walker, the summer sun’s unforgiving heat ensures a brightly lit, dry atmosphere. Sacks of assorted sun-dried spices and dry fruits engage in a fiery battle with vehicle exhaust fumes, inducing harsh gasps for air. Even the immediately spat Paan dries instantly, giving the thoroughfare a warm, reddish hue. In return, men compensate, intoxicated by and personifying various beverages. Tea-Coffee men, grouped in 6s and 7s, huddled and gossiping about unattainable sufficiencies. Milk-drinking schoolboys walking in 4s and 5s make fun of each other’s childish insufficiencies. Lemonade-Sugarcane Juice men standing upright in 2s and 3s, clad in white shirts, discussing each other’s productive ‘proficiencies’. There are also pairs of kinship-drinkers, holding hands and enjoying each other’s company. Hands-free, liquor-filled men hobble alone, reminiscing about their previous nights’ deficiencies.’ Posters of Power-drunk Machismos, who seem to bask in knowledge of their alliciency, are garlanded by cut-outs of differently habitual drinkers of the same beverage. I’m pushing it there. ‘Alliciency’, I only now learned, is the quality or power of attracting.

This is a road of (relatively) long distances and large vehicles. I stared in amazement at the cooperative efforts in leading a garbage truck through,

designed for a road twice as wide. Collectors, drivers, and idle shopkeepers help to direct the minutiae turns necessary to keep the truck from running into, over, and under walls, poles, ditches, lazing cats and dogs, and drooping telephone cables. All the while, other scooters, cyclists, and wheeled vendors, squeeze and weave around the truck. Myriad trash mounds that were built up over the week are churned, collected, and dispatched. And over the course of the day, you will come back to an entirely different street. Consumed by this energetic mix of cacophony and symphony, I knew little about another collective clean-up effort happening around me.

41 I realised soon that I had to leave the main road. I took a right onto Holy Maidan, and at its corner, I spotted a shadowy nook that led me into the vast expanse of Dharavi's labyrinthine interior alleys. These curtains of darkness signify thresholds between main streets and interior alleys. Eager, I skipped toward it and lunged in, and soon cascading shadows began to envelope me until the assuredness of firm ground was displaced by soft steps on pillows filled by feathers of shadow. The coolness was akin to sipping a glass of cold water amidst the summer months. Cocooned by blankets of haze, the sound became my sight. I felt like calling out to my mother, pestering her to change the fan speed or some other such menial request. I heard smatterings of Marathi, Tamil, Bhojpuri, and Hindi. Women's voices. Percolating water, playing children, and melodies of metalware. The loudness of business and industry had receded to an occasional honk.

And soon enough, my eyesight was returned to me, albeit engineered for the darkness. For the first few moments, my mind resorted to remembering the colours I'd see under the light. A tiresome translation that came attached to my initial unfamiliarity. But over time, the surroundings spur another transformation, bringing you into its fold.

The usual texture of steel ladders, wiring, and utility contraptions had taken on different qualities, metals softened by draped fabric and the smell of soap. In haste, I had begun to consider the creaking drain stones as foot traps in the darkness, and that only residents had internalised the secret code of which stones to avoid. I would spend myself contorting, deforming my steps to conform to the formations of the path. Unnecessarily long-winded and wordy movements. Just walk normally, and you will be fine. Pay attention only to yourself, and you might miss the toad-like cat, turned amphibian from the watery gullies.

The coffee-without-breakfast diet made my stomach whir and purr. Dogs looked at me, wanting to help me. They, too, are conditioned to help “lost-looking” folk. I found myself a quiet corner to put my thoughts down before I forgot them.

42



Toad-Like Cat, Dharavi

The “wetness,” I realised is ubiquitous. Most of the gullies are wet from soapy water. Crouched outside their homes, women of many ages are cleaning dishes and washing the public stone path in front of their doorways. Every gully I had seen had 5 or 6 women, schoolgirls, homemakers, or grandmothers. Often conversing and laughing with each other, or a few newlyweds given company by their eager husbands, standing around, listening, or chatting. The gully, in the morning, was characterised by activities I associated with domesticity. But unlike solid walls separating isolated neighbours, it offers a far more fluid interface. My notions of ‘home’ were spilling out onto the alleyway.

43 And much else is fluid. Gallons of soapwater that begin in front of the houses at higher elevations flow down, helping wash the neighbouring stones, and eventually pass into the drains. And light filters in from far above, nearly three stories, refracting and sparkling the various wet surfaces, and in exchange, cooled by them. These “trickling downs” are far truer than that other once copper, then green, now UPI thing that is supposed to trickle down but seems to get stuck to every grubby surface it finds along the way.

Simultaneously, hundreds of clothes are washed, thousands of dishes are cleaned, and paths are scrubbed, leaving the neighbourhood spick and span. There are ideas one encounters in the upper-class city – regarding Dharavi and other “slums” - that people like living in squalor and dirt. No, they just know how to deal with it better and clean far more often. This is very much a collective act of cleaning.

From the quiet corner, two seemingly never-ending gullies set out. Keeping me company, an endearingly awkward indie rested on a black granite step. Its legs dangled from the edge, repeatedly recoiling and slipping back. The step signified entry into the home, but all I could see above it

was a continuous black surface, punctured by glowing indigo window panes imprisoned by steel grills. My eyes worked their magic, metamorphosing a black wall into a curtain, and then into a shimmering, greying doorway opening into the home. I was able to identify textures. What must be a shelf of metal cutlery, a child's water bottle, that my mind translated to blue under the light, but was really a dark shade of purple at the moment. Yes, I was staring into someone's house. No one seemed to be there, and the house was totally open, the door completely ajar. Light seemingly bounced off the boundary. Even while the door was open. The dog that gave me company licked herself in front of the home. Guarding it to some extent. I took leave of the cool corner, nodding to this canine stranger as if she had invited me to her home.

Our paths follow the threshold of magnetic entities

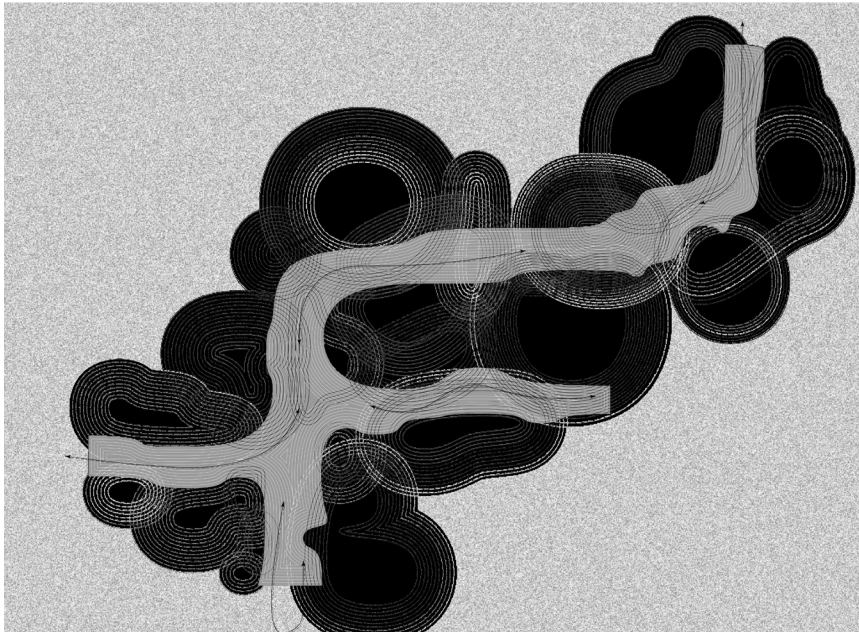


Diagram (Digital): My Experience of Walking In Darkness

With darkness as my mode, I found that the path is not formed solely by the outline of the gully and the extent of the homes. Instead, an infinitude of magnetic attractions and repulsions form one's path. These encompass the goofy dog, the unsure drain cover, sharp ladders, squatting women, toad-like felines, and the scurrying rats. For me, the embarrassment of looking silly added to this, too. My mind, that was used to signs and symbols, received no such relief. Unfortunately for me now, I am not lost; I'm not looking for anything in particular.

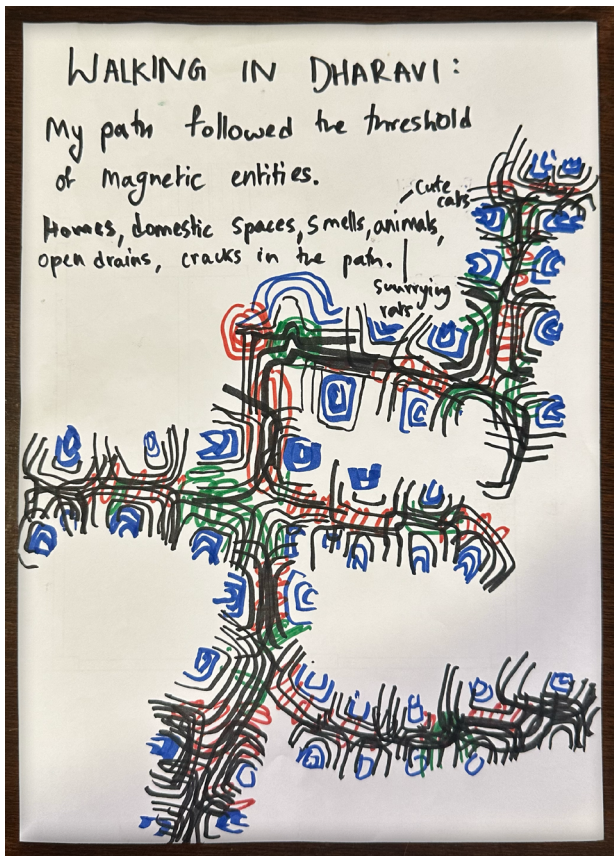


Diagram (Analog): My Experience of Walking In Darkness

This piece dabbles in fiction, so bear with me for just another. Rahul made it clear to me: “Concepts are useful fictions.” Make up your mind, whether the following remains a concept or not.

There is a distinct gendered imagination of the two types of places I experienced during the walk. The “major thoroughfares” and the “interior alleys”. As I wrote earlier, besides the obvious mismatch between the number of males and females, these “Men” roads felt distinctly masculine in their construction. Icons and Monuments of Public Power through Statues and Political Billboards. If one listens carefully, terrifying palpitations of paranoia echo between the narrow, 5-story buildings. Who do I know? Can I be more powerful? Can I win the elections? Many on this road face a drive to accumulate “being,” which Pierre Bourdieu associated with a Phallic modality of being. Here, masculinity is equated with “being-seen” and an “active” presence that dominates through public recognition. Besides the market-led drives for accumulation, these relatively spacious thoroughfares accommodate loud political and religious processions, often featuring intense drumming and horns. Life and Death become spectacles to be seen, taking on a similar masculine conception. Similarly, in lieu of larger spaces, public shrines, religious spaces like temples, mosques, and churches also typify these major thoroughfares. Many temples on the north side of Dharavi were located on street corners. These religious spaces, which may have existed long before the need for main roads, may also have led to routes morphing around them.

46

Despite my self-implicating, desperate mocking of male spaces, I'd be stupid to imply that these spaces weren't integral to Dharavi's functioning. Utilities serviced, wages earned, partnerships and alliances formed, you get the idea.

In opposition, walking into the interior alley felt like a symbolic descent into a home. To be received by womb-like conditions. Water, coolness, and cutlery. And Darknesses. Because the home may not be large enough to fit the multitude of essential domestic activities, the gully becomes an extension of the home. Dark spaces and labyrinthine paths disorient and dissuade the outsider but represent much more to the initiated. The fable of the Lakshman Rekha illustrates the value of these thresholds of darkness, wherein Ravana (the stranger) is unable to abduct Sita without receiving her permission to cross. Within the privacy of the “gullyscape,” a sanctuary for women forms. In transforming the physical boundary of the societal “veil,” i.e, from the women’s body or home interiors bound by four walls to a gully and a neighbourhood, it creates opportunities for women to engage in kinship and form Jacobian - “eyes on the streets” - networks of safety and support. To my embarrassment, I experienced this elsewhere, too. I went for a walk in Juhu Koliwada and instinctively presumed a rigid separation between the private home and the “public” gulleys. Excited by the distinct character of this Koliwada, I took out my camera. Besides the curtained window, I scanned my surroundings and was taken aback by a woman peeking from behind it. Inside me, the feeling of being an outsider crept outward, but I gulped it down and walked on to get lost. And as I found myself walking into many residents’ going about their morning chores, my “intruding” fears churned away in my core. Realising I shouldn’t take photos, I turned around toward the main road. On the way back, a formidable old woman intercepted me, and I knew I was in trouble. She pointed to the woman who spotted me taking my camera out. “This aunty here told me that you were taking photos.” I was compelled to prove to her that I didn’t, and offered my camera. “Please see aunty, I’m not taking.” “You’re a young man, don’t do all this nonsense here.” Flushing with shame and utterly regretful, I bowed my hands in apology, a few sorries sputtered out of me.

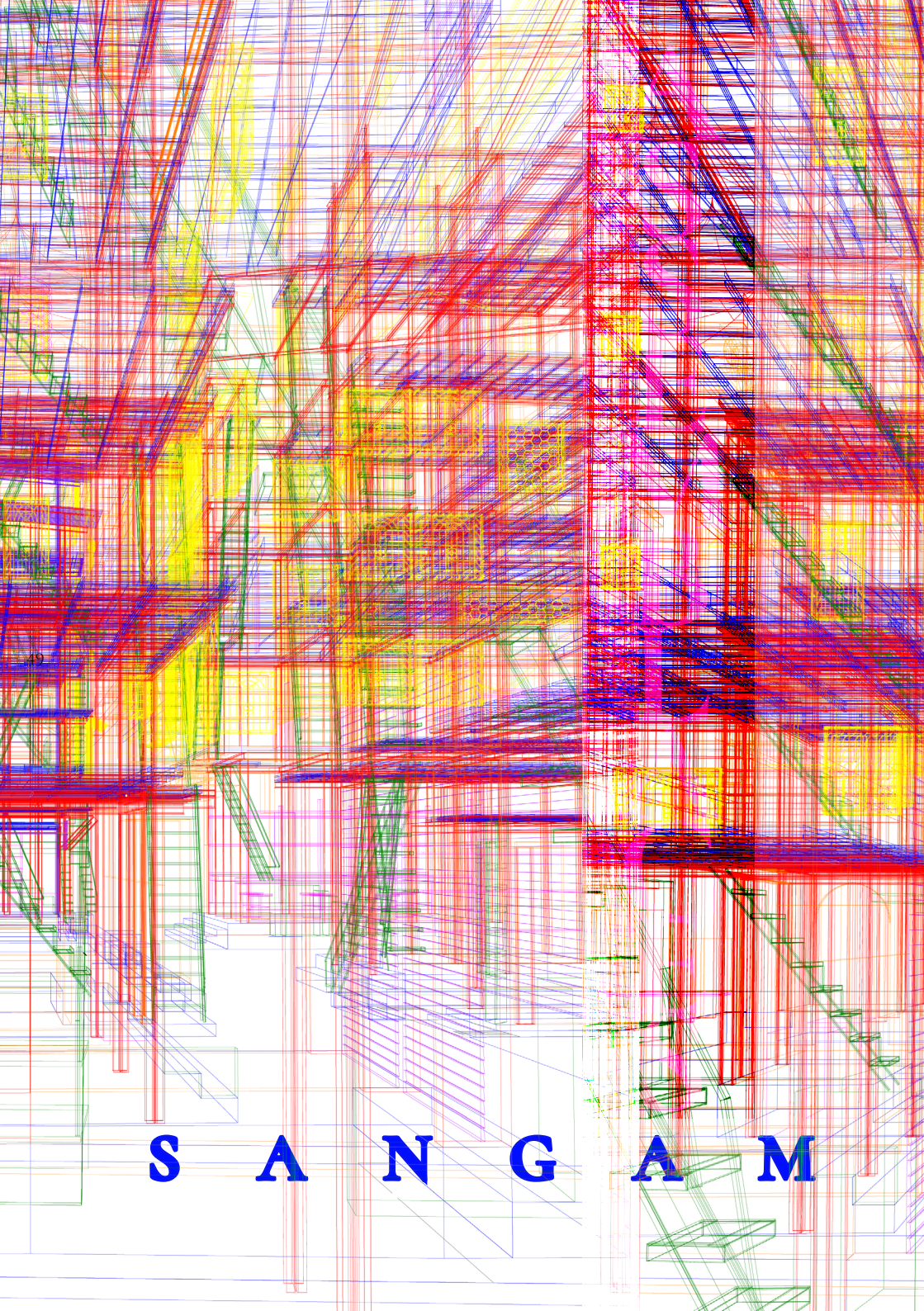
The gulleys follow the logic of the commons, then. Here, social bounds on the woman's domain are altered as well. Even though traditional gendered (domestic) practices are still in effect - washing clothes, dishes, cooking, and childcare - the site of these activities often moves to the gully. You will often see neighbours bathing their dancing children together in the gully. Old women crouched and gossiping. Girls playing sports, bullying, or caring for their little brothers. Even older girls studying together for their board examinations. To be seen "as a woman" is not the same as "seen by women".

I am skeptical whether these alterations can be attributed solely to a lack of space inside the house. The inner gully surely supports a range of social behaviours that allow women to claim agency in shaping their spaces. And the nature of this agency takes on a collective meaning. I am curious to understand how, and whether, this may have happened when agrarian practices were morphed into urban ones. And how the changing physical and metaphysical boundaries shaped the transformations. But what I do know is that the alternative is an entirely different evil.

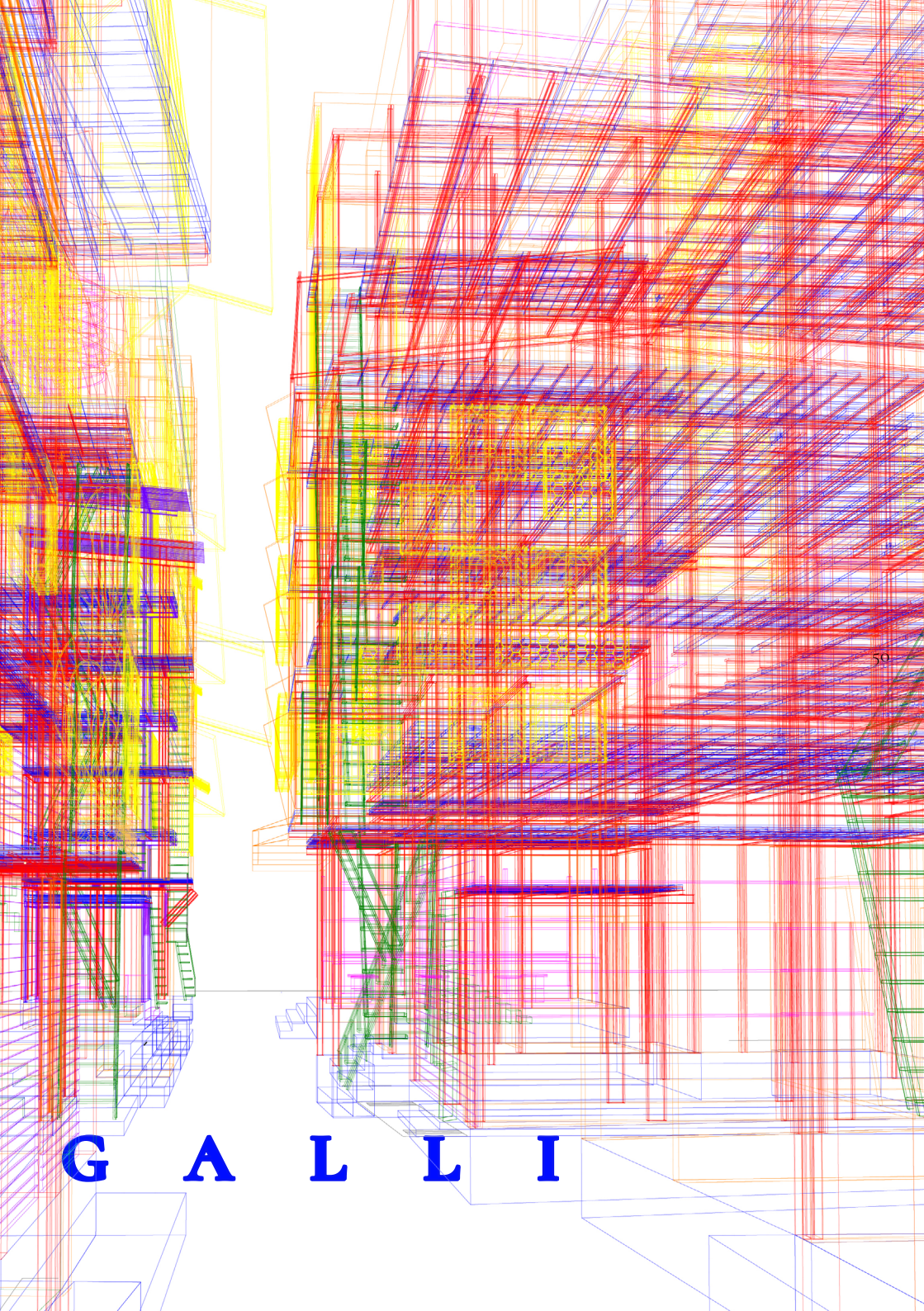
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When the self-apotheosizing hands of bureaucrats and businessmen draw their lines and erect their towers, women's spaces will suffer the most. When the blocks are constructed, and only a stuffy corridor joins a mere 4 houses, these collective acts of female kinship are shattered. The bounds of the house will transform into its simplest form, i.e., within the walls. Privacy becomes private, while people become individuals and women become objects.

I really couldn't tell you where I was. Perhaps it was a fantasy, a woman's oasis. And if I go there again, this time tomorrow, I will find only giant phalluses in their place.



S A N G A M



GALLI

GLOSSARY

Basalt - a hard, dark-colored, fine-grained igneous rock formed from the rapid cooling of magnesium- and iron-rich lava. Exposed Basalt rock is worshipped in Koliwada.

Galli - a narrow street, alleyway, or lane between buildings

Khambadev - A village deity, worshipped in Dharavi Koliwada

Koli - A member of the Koli community; the native fishing community of Mumbai

Koliwada - A Koli habitat that encompasses the built and aquatic environment that support Koli livelihoods.

LIDAR - Light Detection and Ranging is an active remote sensing technology that uses pulsed laser light to measure distances and create highly accurate 3D maps of the real world

Mithi River - The Mithi River is an 18-kilometer-long seasonal river in Mumbai, India, that originates as an overflow from the Powai and Vihar lakes. Flowing through highly urbanized and industrial areas like Saki Naka, Kurla, and the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), it ultimately discharges into the Arabian Sea at Mahim Creek.

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