

The Elusive Slum and Uneven Spatial Trajectories, Focus on Dharavi, Mumbai, India

Rahul Srivastava, Matias Echanove

Institute of Urbanology/Dharavi, India

This essay is based on our discursive engagement with urban issues as well as our role as urban practitioners in the field of planning, architecture and design. We tend to work in habitats that are popularly called 'slums', because they are integral to dominant urbanization processes in a global context.

These habitats bring together our own engagement with practice and discourse while existing along several fault lines. In this essay we examine some of these fault lines, which can be understood as follows. First, mapping territories that are urban, rural and forested as discrete categories tends to create fixed aggregative habitats like villages, cities and wild habitats. Any anachronism becomes an issue to be resolved. Second, such mapping of territories feeds back into each of those habitats as discrete functions, which are seen to be appropriate, either to one or the other. This mostly translates into activities being classified as appropriate or inappropriate. For example, farming or cattle rearing cannot take place in cities, while manufacturing activities are not seen to function as efficiently in rural areas. Cities are perceived as taking over rural areas and forests are seen to be threatened by the existence of all human presence. Thirdly, this further expresses itself at a micro-level in the smallest unit of occupying space, which mostly becomes about zoning. So a family can ideally only live in occupied or owned space but has to work elsewhere. Work and livelihood have to be separated as much as possible. Eventually, entire cities are created by distancing residen-

tial and economic functions from each other. (Of course, new urban practices mark a departure from some of these assumptions, but the dominant tendency in many parts of the world, especially India, is much more segregative in a traditional way.)

Our work has shown us that Dharavi, in Mumbai, India's most celebrated 'slum' (a nomenclature we resist as will become evident in this essay), is called as such not only because of the objective attributes - such as lack of civic infrastructure - but also because it encompasses all these fault lines within itself.

It is dominated by the tool-house, where residential and working functions collapse. It is predominantly a space where manufacturing, processing and recycling happen, but its typology, layout and cultural attributes are reflective of rural life. Besides, even though it is allegedly one of the densest human settlements in the world, it exists next to a small preserved nature park and is part of a highly populated metropolis, Mumbai, which encloses within it a large tropical forest with active wildlife.

It is our contention that by linking the story of Dharavi and its microunits to the larger story of urbanization and the uneven, fluid spatial trajectories that exist in its context, we will be able to liberate concepts that concern habitats in the contemporary world. This will eventually evolve more effective policies with regard to urban issues as a whole.

As this happens, it will also become obvious that the concept of the 'slum' as a definitive category loses its use and value. Cities like Mumbai will become more accepting of its diverse habitats¹ and will eventually form landscapes that may not look like a modern high-rise city but will be equally distant from the slum narrative.

This paper begins with the general description of the contexts we have outlined above. It delves into specifics by looking at Dharavi and, more closely, examining the tool-house as its main organizing principle. Even though the shifts in scale that we make in our analysis are large and sudden, we feel it is necessary to present the arguments in this way to become ac-

tively conscious of the way in which conceptual categories tend to map onto lived experiences in very concrete ways.

India's uneven urbanization?

Our engagement with Dharavi has deepened our understanding of the relativity of space, perceptions about spatial use, and the unexpected ways in which categories of space emerge². What is considered to be dense, empty, an open field or a crowded street? What is considered entrenched in functionality or simply useless is often a matter of perception, practicality and interest.

While Mumbai has one of the most densely populated habitats in the world in Dharavi³, what is barely known about the city is that within its urban limits it also has about 104 square kilometers of bio-diverse tropical forests (part of the western Sayadhari mountain range). This is locally known as the Borivili National Park, (or officially the Sanjay Gandhi National Park) which is fairly regulated and controlled (notwithstanding real estate encroachments now and then). Similarly, next to Dharavi's 400 acres of intense habitation, survives the 37-acre Maharashtra Nature Park (Bapat, 2005).

These spaces of protected nature were part of a nationwide move by the state, initiated in the early 1970s, to protect forests from commercial exploitation. For a couple of decades it replayed a colonial drama of pushing out indigenous communities from the forests, accusing them of being integral to the destruction process (Padmanabhan, 2011).

Their official criminalization was accompanied by the entry of organized players who created another kind of economy of use. They exploited forests for timber and minerals. In recent years the government has restored rights to previously criminalized tribal communities, and it has launched partner-

ships between local state agencies and them to be custodians of the forests together.

We introduce the landscape of the city's forests to complicate the narrative of density that typically associated with Mumbai. While, on one hand, images of Mumbai's high-rises juxtaposed against its shanties constantly circulate around the global media, what is not reported are the several cases of leopard attacks on human settlements around its forest edges (sometimes less than 30—40 km from the city center), according to the *Afternoon Despatch and Courier* (2013). The Borivili National Park curves in an out of the city, making it a sudden backdrop to high-rise residential apartments, sharing walls with forests with predatory animals like panthers and leopards.

Mumbai's unpredictable use of space, its folding into and firewalling off forests from dense settlements, its ability to allow varied land-use patterns (the presence of cows and buffaloes grazing from trashcans is not just a rare exotic vestige, but part of active milk-producing local economies that can enclose a stable or a farm in a highly populated neighbourhood) (Lewis, 2008), its highly skilled habitats such as Dharavi, which can produce space from multiple uses (Nijman, 2009), intelligent temporal organization of work and a million other activities can co-exist with relatively vacant lands still being transacted in the real-estate market, as well as forested areas that surround the northern frontiers of the city.

This essay contends that these distinctive spatial uses, coexistence of a wide variety of habitats, and the city's very problematic official attitude towards housing and land management needs to be understood in terms of wider inter-referential categories, such as urban, rural and the natural forest. Segregating these concepts tends to harden fundamental assumptions of the city, the village, the slums and the forest, making them increasingly discrete and distinct from each other. Larger urban policies are anchored to these categories and notions of urbanization, and its accompanying processes are overlaid on realities that are essentially more cross-referential. The fact that urban histories and structures can encompass a wide variety



of spatial uses and habitats is not adequately appreciated, leading to faulty policies related to housing, especially in the context of the issue of housing shortages and the presence of slums.

The level of urbanization in the country (which technically means the number of people living in habitats of a minimum population of 5000 with at least 75% of male workers engaged in non-agricultural pursuits and a density of at least 400 persons per sq km), is still less than 30% of the total population of over one billion. Even with such a wide definition of what constitutes 'urban', India's urbanization levels are low, notwithstanding its three or four mega-cities with a 10 million plus population (Census, 2001). Rural-urban migration has also slowed down further since the 1980s (Darshini *et al.*, 2010).

The most recent census from the government points out that household industrial units in villages and the growing dependence on non-agrarian incomes have gained in importance. According to the 2001 Census, 986,629 houses are used as factories and workshops in urban areas alike but as many as 1,224,283 such sites exist in rural India (Census, 2001). Thus, in the words of urban sociologist Dipankar Gupta, 'in economic terms at least, the village is not exactly textbook fashion rural any more' (Gupta, 2011). The same Census study also points out that the share of urban population in the million plus cities in 2001 stood at 68.7%, but by 2011 this came down to 42.6% - a decline of roughly 26%. Whatever urban growth is happening is not taking place in the big cities but in small towns all over the country. These small towns are deeply integrated into their rural hinterlands with people commuting everyday, up and down and across, creating urban systems over vast territories. India's other tough truth is that the rural population remains very high and has probably increased by a slight margin since the last census. The most recent figures show that 72.2% of the population continues to live in India's 641,000 villages (Census, 2001).

Male migration from village to village, both intrastate (41.6%) and interstate (20.7%), remains significant. A migrant's destination in India need not

always be a city, even though that is mostly the case. The rural net domestic product is as high as 45.5%. This means that nearly half the village economy is no longer agricultural, with many more workshops and household industries in its fold. People are staying in the village but not necessarily working on land, at least not for a lot of their time. This rise in commerce in rural India is a symptom of how urban areas in the vicinity of the villages are also changing (Census, 2001).

Our own research reveals that a substantial number of migrant communities in Mumbai invest in building or rebuilding homes in their native towns - sometimes more than a 1000 kilometres away - with which they keep connections intact (Echanove and Srivastava, 2013). Familial structures ensure multiple sources of income, act as social security in times of crisis and help with credit to start new ventures. Each family can have members spread across the country. They use the country's vast and inexpensive train network to sustain this lifestyle. A dramatic example of this state of affairs is outlined in historian Raj Chandavarkar's book on Bombay's working classes (Chandavarkar, 1994). He points out that around half of the city's textile mill workers in the early 20th century came from one district on the west coast of India: Ratnagiri. They commuted seasonally using a ferry service, to inevitably participate in seasonal agricultural activities back home every year. Their industrial income and agricultural income complemented each other. As members of Mumbai's celebrated working class, this example is particularly poignant.

Our ongoing engagement with and research on Mumbai also affirms that migrant communities from cities such as Mumbai and Delhi invest in both non-agricultural activities in their villages and real-estate projects. Their affiliation with at least two (sometimes more) locations, through their family structures and constant travel via railways (and these connections have been facilitated further by cheap mobile phones) create all kinds of spatial dynamics that do not easily fit into a vision of urbanization as a one-way street, with people flocking to cities with no resources.

The simplistic models urban planners and national agencies use (predicated on the idea of urbanization as a permanent singular moment) do not do justice to realities - at least on the Indian sub-continent.

The main concern we have is that such simplistic models create distorted and apocalyptic notions of urban futures and present the issue of housing (and the presence of so-called slums in many cities around the world) as the main cause of urban problems. Mike Davis's work, *Planet of Slums* also succumbs to this vision even though it attacks neo-liberal policies more specifically as the cause of the housing crisis (Davis, 2006). However, by not looking at the larger issue of uneven urbanization trends in countries such as India or ignoring the internal dynamics of habitats in terms of categories and nomenclatures (many of Mumbai's slums share typological, functional and historical characteristics with villages within its urban framework), the notion of slums, as he uses it, becomes a simplistic category that only partially addresses pertinent issues.

Shifty concepts: slums and other habitats

Expressing dissatisfaction with the use of the word *slums* to describe and label such habitats has been a recurrent theme in our arguments (Echanove and Srivastava, 2008). What is or is not a slum is often unclear. Villages, working class settlements, settled habitats that are not easily assimilated in a growing urban sprawl, sometimes even middle-class but shabbily constructed buildings, are all lumped together under this category.

The term *slum*, if used loosely, tends to be ideologically co-opted, especially when it absorbs these diverse built forms under its label. Such an ideological intention often plays itself out in the speculative financial world of real estate construction. Real estate lobbies are well known for their hunger for new territories in a world of finite land resources. They find cre-

ative ways of reinventing needs for spatial use; the redevelopment of older habitats is a very common mode of doing so. By labeling a habitat as one that needs redevelopment, it also receives the support of administrative agencies. In this way, the word *slum* develops an ideological resonance and the discursive space surrounding it becomes strategic.

The more we engage with the reality of construction industries as they play themselves out in a contemporary urban context such as Mumbai, the more evident it becomes that slum redevelopment projects here are less concerned with the life of their inhabitants than with generating new construction sites for building companies who are servicing a speculative economy. Today, thanks to the Slum rehabilitation Scheme in Mumbai, most rehabilitation of slum dwellers is subsidized by release of land for constructing apartments to be sold in the market (Patel *et al.*, 2009). As mentioned earlier, Mike Davis uses a large canvas to talk about the future of housing and the rise of slums at the global level. His analysis works brilliantly in analyzing the rise of inequality in terms of a force-feeding of liberal economic policies to developing countries. However, if we accept Davis's vision of slums as being manifestations of certain kinds of economic relations, then we are forced to view slums as an integral rural phenomenon as well. After all, just because the huts of landless and poor peasants are not historically seen as slums does not mean that they have never functioned as such. Davis traps himself in a tautology by zeroing in on economic principles as the defining moment for housing and ignoring the larger discussion of typologies and forms. If his argument is pushed ahead, the whole world has always been predominantly a planet of slums. Peasant homes, tribal hamlets and residences of slaves in a pre-modern context were all functions of economic relations besides being dependent on - and exploited by - dominant classes.

In this observation alone, our thesis contradicts Davis's overall argument. The planet is not set to witness an increased presence of slums for the first time in its history. It is simply re-arranging resources to suit an economy that is now openly acknowledging the fact that the indicators of develop-

ment are almost singularly indicators of a certain kind of urban growth. It is not just that the poor migrants are moving to cities and creating slums; they are also bringing in their histories with them. Slums from rural areas are being transplanted in urban contexts. In countries such as India, urban contexts are treating the urban poor exactly as older feudal agrarian economies treated their rural poor.

Conversely, as Jan Breman points out in his review of Davis, modern slums are emerging in villages as well and are being referred to as such, complicating the process of urbanization in countries such as India (Breman, 2006). In fact, it is becoming particularly difficult to distinguish slums from villages in many parts of the peri-urban areas of the country.

If one adds to this explanation the special case of Mumbai, then slums are not only a question of developing a critique of the economic policies that the world is choosing for itself but also about the idea of the city. Many studies demonstrate how the city produces more pockets of urban poverty by converting its land-use patterns into real estate development zones that push the poor to its peripheries. These real estate development zones subscribe to a certain kind of appropriate built-form - the high-rise - to validate its imposition. In cities such as Mumbai, this form itself helps in escalating costs and pushes the poor further into infrastructure-deprived regions.

As Linda Clarke and David Harvey demonstrate (Clarke, 1992; Harvey, 2012), capitalism has always operated best within the context of the city. It has not only responded to the rise of the modern city after industrialization but has also actively propagated it as the most appropriate human habitat for modern living. Besides, this propagation has a material basis - the construction industry - that benefits most from this process and is constantly looking for new land and new ways of appropriating old modes of land use.

The construction industry, along with its baggage of architects, engineers and urban planners, have an historical advantage in that they have been perceived as playing an ideologically neutral role in the process of economic transformations. For long, we were under the impression that they service

a foregone economic choice: the logic that industrialization follows urbanization. However, as Davis himself demonstrates, they may also lead the process. While doing so, they evoke ideological justifications (as do all economic interests) and use the notion of the city - a specific kind of city - as their ideological anchor. They transform the city from a site where different ideologies play themselves out to becoming an ideology itself.

While theoretically, the high-rise apartment block has been used in Mumbai as a possible solution to the city's problems of density, in reality it has only produced more slums. This happens because the high-rise apartment block comes hand-in-hand with increased costs of building and a new economy of land use, one that depends significantly on wider roads, more parking spaces and, in the final order of things, fewer occupants per square foot.

In Mumbai, the earlier colonial mode of monopolistic land use was substituted, in independent India, by an enormously corrupt administration that protected large land-holdings and worked in tandem with corrupt builders. What it used to justify this state of affairs was the argument that land in Mumbai was scarce and people too many. Besides, the image of the city as a modern city meant funneling all resources to the production of appropriate habitats.

This process was recently evident most clearly when the city's industrial history was re-written. Old defunct mills, with acres and acres of land in them, were released into the market even as housing activists cried themselves hoarse saying that a proportion of the land be used for housing the poor. Not only did the authorities not respond to the demand, even the use of land for open space and parks was rejected. Old chawls in the area were then rapidly pulled down to make room for shopping malls and high-rise apartment blocks.

Looking at the story of slums across the world, one is struck by the relativity of the term. In one context it appears as impoverished living in the most basic sense - without water and toilets - while in another it could denote a



full-fledged middle class housing complex that is a slum only in relation to the larger story in which it is embedded.

If one builds on this cross-cultural understanding of slums and locates the one common variable that cuts across contexts, we suspect it is that the slum is simply an inappropriate habitat in contrast to the larger aspiration of the economy in which it is embedded. One is not de-contextualizing the impoverished slum from the story. The impoverished and the inappropriate habitat are collapsed into one for the overall push in a specific direction: the one to which the construction industry aspires. It is this idealized notion of the high-rise city that is used by builders and urban planners in cities like Mumbai to push forth a land-use pattern that produces more slums.

Thus far, the city's poor have responded to the crisis by highlighting their impoverishment - a move that is picked up by Davis to indicate that the problem lies mainly in questions of economic transformation. However, the issues of homelessness and slums also need to address issues of inappropriate habitats as well. This can require some well-constructed arguments such as those by Charles Correa in his work *The New Landscape*, mentioned earlier (Correa, 2010). According to Correa, the high-density low-rise form that much of Mumbai historically demonstrated is widespread in urban areas not only in India but also throughout much of Asia. In concrete terms, it is the relinquishing of this habitat ideal - in favour of the high-rise apartment complex - that most benefits the builder and urban planning lobby and contributes to the increasing presence of slums all around the world.

According to Correa, in the Mumbai of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the relationship of dwellers to architects, builders and living space was more interactive. Dwellers had more control over the process of building homes, and learned building skills played a vital role in the development of these spaces. Villages, clusters of small buildings and colonies of bungalows were built through these negotiations. Even though major architectural and engineering companies shaped the docks, government offices and public buildings, the inhabitants in most of the native city had a greater say

in building their own homes. In many cases, and definitely until the early twentieth century, much of the native spaces were surprisingly 'rural'. Orchards and paddy fields accompanied the docks and industries as backdrops for a newly emerging city.

Interestingly, the poor in Mumbai still follow a similar pattern of building habitats. They find cost-effective ways of building them that incorporate a multitude of skills. What causes them to become slums is that the land on which they reside is part of a competitive market. This renders their built-forms illegal and squeezes them into a zone of non-citizenship that traps them further in a spiral of oppression. Almost all their income is eaten up by this status, and they become victims of the informal apparatus of the state, which exploits their position and earns massive illegal revenues from these transactions. This creates a context in which their growth and the threat of their annihilation is a constant presence.

This story is well known in Mumbai. However, even as this knowledge fuels an activist zeal amongst everyone — the non-corrupt dimension of the state, voluntary groups and the media - it often translates itself into a desire to build homes for the poor, mirroring the construction industry. This involves planners, builders, engineers and architects. The mathematics is worked out to allow for a particular kind of built-form to dominate the city's landscape - most certainly vertical and definitely out of the control of the dwellers. Almost immediately, the question of costs rises and advocates for an acceptable compromise that lets in for-profit builders and allows them to subsidize the homes of the poor. The homes for the poor become shadowy and shaky versions of the real thing - built in the image of the modern city - but not only are they never numerically enough to absorb the impoverished millions, there is no guarantee that they will outlive even one generation of the intended inhabitants.

The ineffectiveness of this method is becoming clearer as slums continue to dominate the landscape, and vast tracts of precious (hitherto unavailable) land is used to create massive, expensive apartments. Defying all logic,



Mumbai sees more tall buildings appearing with fewer people utilizing the floor space index. Where verticality is supposed to absorb more populations, space is manipulated to produce expensive habitats, and of course these approximate the aspirational habitats that one finds all over the world - with swimming pools, enormous personal spaces, multi-storied car-parks and lush gardens. However, in poorer economies like India, their horizons are always darkened by the presence of the poor and their shabby habitats.

According to Leeds (1994), we cannot view urban and rural spaces solely in terms of their geographical and occupational distinctions. He points out that throughout human history, although most people have lived in rural habitats, these habitats have been shaped and ruled directly or indirectly by the relatively smaller populated urban centers. Agricultural practices have often evolved to produce certain kinds of grains for taxation, and farming systems have been linked - through feudal structures - to important urban centers. Thus, the world had been urbanized for a very long time (even if most people did not physically live in cities), and the industrial revolution only marked a quantitative shift of populations into urban spaces. Most importantly, the narratives accompanying modernity, progress and urbanization have been used and re-used in different ways. The ideology of urbanism as presented above is very much part of this narrative and needs to be analytically isolated, especially in contexts such as India, with its long history of (urbanized) rural habitats. There are remarkable similarities between urban slums in Mumbai and the rural habitats its inhabitants have left behind. How should cities look like in an increasingly unequal world?

Dharavi: tool-house city

Mumbai is India's financial capital and has always attracted immigrants from all over the sub-continent. The neighbourhood of Dharavi is a living

testimony to that history, with populations coming from all parts of the country. The city's authorities, unable to cope with its rapid growth, which only accelerated after India gained independence in 1947, have left newcomers to develop their own habitats, which have now become fully integrated into the city's economic and political life. From a small fisherman's village at the mouth of the Mithi River, Dharavi has grown into a hyper dense settlement and hub for all kinds of cottage industries ranging from recycling to leatherwork, embroidery to food processing.

Often described as a large slum, Dharavi is in fact a highly upwardly-mobile neighbourhood that generations of local masons and residents have built over the years. We refer to it as a neighbourhood 'in formation', because it never ceases to improve and reorganize itself. The malleability of its built form has led to the emergence of particular architectural typologies and patterns of movement. One of the most distinctive aspects of its urban fabric is the presence of what we call the 'tool-house', a space that is used both for living and for income generation. The tool-house emerges in response to the need to optimize space in a context of scarcity, but it is also embedded in a cultural mould, where community ties are strong and permeate both personal and professional spaces.

One of the most enduring artefacts of pre-industrial society in contemporary times is the tool-house; the habitat of the artisan where work and residence co-exist amicably. Conceptually located between Le Corbusier's machine for living and Ivan Illich's convivial tool, the tool-house is an apparatus fulfilling economic and sheltering purposes. It is a dominant architectural typology in many parts of Mumbai that have never been planned or zoned, including Dharavi. The tool-house integrates functions that are usually segregated in planned neighbourhoods. The aspect of the tool-house that is most relevant to this study is that it combines many functions within a restricted space. These functions can be superimposed, with the same space being used in different ways throughout the day. Or they can be juxtaposed.

posed, allowing different activities to be performed simultaneously. Sometimes, functions are merged, producing new opportunities.

The principles at work in the spatial organization of the tool-house can be extended to the entire neighbourhood of Dharavi, and thus help understand the relationship of such unplanned neighbourhoods to the rest of the city. In the past, production practices took place mostly in the arti-sanal homes of rural areas, while cities were political and trading centres (Echanove and Srivastava, 2008). Today, in a post-industrial hyper-urbanized era, versions of the tool-house can be found in an artist's loft, a web-designer's den, a hidden restaurant in an immigrant enclave or in an up-market artis-anal shopfront behind which an old family continues to perform a traditional occupation.

Several of Mumbai's unplanned settlements are shaped by the contours of the tool-house. Every wall, nook and corner becomes an extension of the tools of the trade of its inhabitants, where the furnace and the cooking hearth exchange roles and sleeping competes with warehouse space, with eventually a cluster of tool-houses making for a thriving workshop-neighbourhood. The form is intimately linked to the larger economic context of decentralized production and the subsidizing of costs by the complex and layered use of space. It is organically connected to the units of the family, the community and the persistence of the village form in the modern metropolis. The relativity of space and time are evident in a place like Dharavi through the form of the tool-house, where space and distance expand and contract in flexible ways.

Without moving an inch special spatial arrangements can transform a static entity such as a home into a dynamic economic vehicle of mobility. This happens by ensuring that it functions efficiently as a tool-house and only moves goods and people when needed. It sometimes uses multiple versions of itself all along the intended route of transport to relay information, goods and people without anything more advanced than individual physical energy. At other times, it does this by delivering goods to its borders on time,

so that they can be plugged into a courier system to the airport and then to another part of the country and world via the most advanced technological modes of transport.

There are several kinds of tool-houses. They can be a small room or rooms owned or rented by a family or by co-workers. They can be attached to a restaurant or another commercial establishment or someone else's home. A tool-house can be an elaborate structure or a corner of a room being used in multiple ways. It can be a dormitory-workshop, a family home-workshop or simply a home with a shopfront. Even if people from other areas in the city commuted to Dharavi, their place of work typically would not be a commercial establishment but a residential-work site combination where other workers lived.

Functional optimization 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 have often fascinated visitors for this reason. We have seen countless photo-documentaries showing tightly organized interior spaces in Asia, with the bicycle hung on the wall or the bed slotting into the wall at the push of a button. We have seen futuristic visions of metabolic buildings made of 8 sq m residential capsules being built and destroyed in Tokyo. But no other city has pushed the integration of functions as much as Mumbai.

In Mumbai domestic spaces 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. Yet, relation to space and those who occupy it - is also eminently social and cannot be reduced to economic factors alone. Throughout South Asia, even in contexts that are not space-deprived, the 'home' is not necessarily a 'personal' space, and easily accommodates visitors and multiple functions.

Throughout India, social structures such as families, community and castes play an important role in income generation and space formation. It

is fairly typical to see children or grandparents helping at the counter of a shop, while the parents are busy elsewhere. Intergenerational transmission of crafting skills and goodwill are also very much alive. Community ties facilitate business transactions, 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 an extended family that includes people from one's neighbourhood or place of origin. Having distant relatives sharing sleeping space on the floor for a few weeks is not unusual, even in middle-class families. In that way, village ties, caste membership and culture play an important role in the (re)configuration of living and working spaces in the city.

Unfortunately, this entire intricate habitat is blanketed under the word *slum*, and Dharavi has been declared an unfit area for habitation and in dire need of redevelopment.

Uneven cities

urbanization, says Debord (1996), breaks local barriers and autonomy only to separate people and communities along functional lines. Shifting residents from their houses to high-rise buildings in Dharavi means disconnecting them from their tools of production and the street economy. What has rooted Dharavi in the city is its own breakup into over eighty *nagars*, each with its own sense of independence, local identity, set of productive practices and regional ties. These industrious neighbourhoods, with their rural roots, small-enterprises and communitarian ethos, are urban avatars of Gandhi's idealized vision of the village.

Dharavi's cosmopolitanism and urbanity lives in its infinite number of streets and gullies that serve as public and market spaces. This is where the multitudes come together. This basic freedom to interact, trade and strive for a better life is what Dharavi has offered to generations of migrants.

The planned redevelopment of Dharavi ignores these dimensions, making it destructive.

The impulse to demolish in order to reconstruct is not new, nor is there anything inherently wrong with it. However, it ought to incorporate a trajectory of preservation and creation. In the context of Dharavi, what needs to be preserved are not individual houses but the ability of residents to improve them. This know-how is embedded in the way people relate to their environment. Any forced eviction and destruction would be a crime against people and their history. Demolition without preservation, especially when it is institutionalized and normalized through state machinery and entrenched social prejudice, can create destructive bitterness and resentment.

Fifteenth century architectural theoretician Leon Battista Alberti condemned demolition as an act of extraordinary violence, which he called a crime and violation of fundamental rights. He says that the actual reason for most demolitions is the incapacity of architects to build without eliminating everything that already occupies the site. According to Alberti, the reasons to avoid demolishing are economy, respect for previous human generations and the preservation of a heritage that has foundational values for the identity of a place. The preservation of the built environment permits the collective development of a humane world.

In an important essay on demolition in architecture, anthropologist Françoise Choay gives the example of Japan where Shintosit temples are rebuilt every twenty years (2006). The reconstruction is an opportunity to evolve, perfect and pass on a tradition to future generations. It brings new innovations each time. Ancient construction crafts and techniques have been not only 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. Rather than preventing growth, this practice contributes to becoming the most populated and advanced city in the world.

Choay echoes poet and linguist A.K. Ramanujan (1990) when she points out that the form of preservation through recreation is similar to the trans-

mission of myths. Myths have historically been oral retellings with the imprint of a new voice and personality each time. This plasticity of form and its impermanence is what allows for creative architectural practices as well as powerful myths to emerge and endure. When neighbourhoods like Dharavi are disempowered, erased and ultimately substituted for totally different urban forms and spatial organization, it is the whole city that is cut off from its evolutionary process. This is why we can say that the redevelopment of Dharavi gravely imperils its development, the development of its people and the future of Mumbai. It would produce a convenient location for exclusive and privileged real estate development on the graveyard of one of the most open, inclusive and upwardly-mobile parts of the city. The impressively dynamic industrial base of Dharavi and its evolving urban morphology would disappear, and a majority of its dwellers would be pushed back to the city's edge, forced to restart from zero. Instead of clearing a slum, the redevelopment project would actually create new slums and poverty.

The urbanization process as it is unfolding in Mumbai will not give Dharavi residents more legitimacy, money or independence. The redevelopment of Dharavi is aimed at creating more value around the land and eventually creating a new speculative economy for residential and commercial buildings. Current residents will either have to integrate into the new economy as service providers or leave.

Urbanization produces more pockets of urban poverty by converting its land-use patterns into real estate development zones. These zones eventually push erstwhile slum dweller to its peripheries, which then are seen to be dark horizons again waiting to be developed. These real estate development zones subscribe to a certain kind of appropriate built form - the non-slum structure, which is usually a commodity meant for a speculative market. In cities like Mumbai this process itself escalates costs and pushes the poor further into new corners. What we are seeing in Dharavi today is not a slum development project but the same process of new slum generation along with the exploitation of valuable land that wants to convert a living neigh-

bourhood into a past-tense.

It is understood that the construction industry in the city is in cahoots with the state government and bureaucracy, which are in a hurry to see this process unfold as soon as possible. What they are pushing is the high-rise apartment block as a quick fix for all problems of density and alleged homelessness. What is simply happening is that the high-rise block comes with increased costs of building and a new economy of land use, which eventually out-prices most erstwhile slum dwellers even if they have been initially 'rehabilitated' on site. Thus, the ex-slum dwellers are squeezed into tiny housing blocks neighbouring high-end flats, built on the land released by the slum redevelopment project. Eventually the ex-slum dweller moves, since it is not economically sustainable to stay. The released space goes back into the market.

The ineffectiveness of slum redevelopment projects in the mode of proposed master-plans for Dharavi is increasingly evident. As so-called slums continue to dominate, the city tracts of precious (hitherto unavailable) land are used to create habitats for the real estate market. Defying all logical use of space, Mumbai sees more of these complexes appearing which absorb less of the population and witnessing spiraling costs. Where fresh construction is supposed to absorb more populations, in reality the space is manipulated to produce habitats based on speculative needs - with swimming pools, enormous personal spaces, multi-storied parking lots and lush gardens. Paradoxically, the more space released into the market, the scarcer it becomes, as it is instantly gobbled up by the construction industry selling homes to speculators or high-end users. Many flats sold in the city remain vacant, newer flats take longer to be sold and prices continue to soar.

Debord claims that social emancipation is not only about appropriating the means of production but also about the appropriation of our own history. The ongoing process of urbanization in Mumbai and the world at large is one that erases as much as it builds. What is at stake in Dharavi is not only the sheltering of hundreds of thousands of people and their economic inde-



pendence, but also their social history, which - far from being celebrated by the authorities - is dismissed and deemed unworthy of a future. The process of urbanization that Debord describes negates the city because it deprives neighbourhoods of the chance to reproduce and reinvent themselves.

What master planners and developers propose would interrupt an ongoing process of development. The idea that development follows a linear trajectory from the village to the slum and the slum to the 'modern city' is plainly wrong, particularly if that indicates a specific form of urbanization characterized by high-rise buildings and large motorways. This 'modern city' is, in fact, urbanization without a city. What makes the city is the people that inhabit it and the way they interact with their environment, making it their own, constantly balancing between their history, present needs and aspirations, both individually and collectively. The city is reproduced everyday through millions of social and commercial interactions. The city should therefore not be understood as a counterpoint to the village, or the place that ends where farmland starts. These are enmeshed at many levels in the city's economy, fabric and ethos. The city ends when its inhabitants can no longer communicate with each other and interact with the world around them.

Conclusion

This lack of communication is as much a function of weak concepts as it is conflicting purposes and a confusion of visions. In this essay we have only touched the tip of a huge conceptual iceberg. There is much more to explore and explain. Our engagement with Dharavi and other such settlements in Mumbai and elsewhere leads us to a larger understanding of habitats and connecting concepts including that of forests, villages and wilderness, which we see as invisible but influential categories through which the idea of 'urban' operates.

We conclude with a fascinating story told by anthropologist Suresh Sharma in *Tribal Identity and the Modern World* (1994). The Agaria tribes of the forests in Central India were adept at smelting iron and had a rich legacy of crafts involving ironwork. They responded with enthusiasm to the coming of the iron and steel world of the railways but were confronted with an administrative gaze that could not see them as anything more than savage forest-dwellers. Instead of harnessing their enthusiasm, their presence in the forests (where they used to shallow-mine iron in an ecologically sound way) was criminalized. The forests then were either mined and destroyed or zoned as a Nature Preserve.

This compulsion for categorization and zoning runs deep. A village in a city is eventually considered to be anachronistic and must either be gentrified or lose its identity as a village. In Mumbai, several of the biggest slums, including Dharavi, have a nucleus that once was a recognizable village. It is easy for a village - which should not exist in the city in the first place according to the laws of demarcation - to slowly be downgraded into a slum, especially when rural refugees start crowding the city and need to be housed.

A place like Dharavi, which is almost all about industry, is illegal for another reason. It violates another zoning taboo whereby residences and work places must never overlap. This taboo makes no sense in Dharavi where the main built form is the tool-house, a multi-use space that defies categorization and zoning. Yet, the laws continue to cite disputable and excessive reasoning - at every level.

We work at both levels: on the ground by examining, working and subverting administrative logic about such habitats in Mumbai while simultaneously being engaged with the theoretical concerns and assumptions about urban life and forms. Therefore, it was necessary for us to contemplate the points of convergence between these realms.

As Max Weber has famously said, the concept is a useful fiction but one that is very real in its impact on the world. That point of impact is the site of convergence. Dharavi as a subversion of the concept of *slum* is at the heart

of such a convergence in the context of Mumbai. Dharavi challenges some fundamental concepts with which we work - the house, workplace, density, space, village, city, urban, rural, wilderness. These challenges are the starting point for our engagement.

¹There are officially more than 150 urban villages in Mumbai. The population of residents living in these villages is estimated to be around one million residents.

² www.urbz.net, www.airoots.org

³ Most accounts, including Sharma's definitive work on the neighbourhood (2000) indicate that this is so, even though no reliable figures for measuring this density exists.

