

REVISIONING MUMBAI: DEMOCRATISING PUBLIC SPACES

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Mumbai University's Centenary Celebrations
International Conference by Mariam Dossal, Convocation Hall, Mumbai University,
January 2007, 17th January, 2007

Mumbai is an expanding city with diminishing space.

Democratic space is sharply declining inspite of the rapid `growth` and `development` of the city. This decline is manifested and experienced in many ways including the deteriorating state of public-spaces and quality of life that is adversely affecting our lives and relationships at all levels. Recent trends in the development of our city is rather disturbing, the city is being fragmented into pieces with exclusive and competing spaces thus restraining the growth of the city and its people.

There is an urgent need to arrest this decline and to democratize public-space. This is to pave-way for participation of all the people and undertake inclusive development of the city and to bring-to surface, the views from below.

The growth of Mumbai and the developments here have been significant to the country. Thus, the make-over of Mumbai to a global city has been our P.M's wish along with the entire ruling class. Government's plans and policies since the early 90's have continuously reflected this trend. Transforming Mumbai from a manufacturing hub to an international banking, finance and trading centre has been the mainstream agenda. The phenomenal rise in investments and turn-over in real-estate business are some reflections of this exclusive endeavor.

These developments have been possible due to a major political shift by our Nation State from the commitments of a post-independent socialist state to neo-liberalization. (1) Privatization of all developments including public housing, social amenities, infrastructure and market-led development has been the objective. (2) Our governments and the govt. of Maharashtra in particular have given-up planning for the development of our cities and towns in order to provide un-hindered opportunity to the free market forces. In Mumbai the MMRDA itself has given-up its role as a planning agency and instead turned into a developing agency. The governments connivance with the mill-owners in undermining a cohesive and comprehensive plan for the development of mill's land is a good recent example. Slums redevelopment scheme and cessed buildings reconstruction are other examples of this development anarchy. The cessed buildings reconstruction along with slums redevelopment threaten to and have led to unpredicted levels of displacement. Conversion of housing to commercial and the most recent take-overs of housing colonies – explains the extent of unplanned growth. We are indeed `enamored` and `pleased` with such `exclusive` mega projects in Mumbai – particularly

the malls, multiplexes and upper segment housing. Our new notions of public-spaces find reflections in the atriums of these malls and multiplexes.

(3) On the other hand our governments have backed out of their responsibility to carry-out social development work and are merely, facilitating private enterprises. Authoritarian and often fascist acts of our democratically elected governments have alienated the majority people from the main stream development programmes and projects.

The irrelevant Development Plan (DP) of our city is yet another example of the governments apathy and lack of concern for planning and people-oriented development of the city. Our future in providing affordable low-priced mass housing and land for it has been possible due to this lop-sided land-use plan. As we know slums occupy a mere 8% of the city's land-mass or occupy land area equivalent to 16% of the land reserved for housing. Our D.P. does not have any land reserved exclusively for housing the working class and the poor who constitute over 60% – 70% of the city's population. Instead of planning for the city's development, the govt. is pre-occupied with the tinkering of the D.C. Regulations. Changes and amendments of the DCR benefits the **(4)** Real-estate interest. The influence of the real-estate business over the government is historical. In fact the politics of this city has been continuously influenced and shaped by the Real-estate agenda, and always at the cost of social development and people's access to housing, amenities etc.

(5) Public assets including open-spaces, are being systematically depleted for private profiteering.

Formal sector jobs with minimum wage standards, health insurance and working hours limits are given a go in the city. There has been a big growth of informal sector jobs instead. The rise of the informal sector and the struggles of the people for survival and sustenance has been romanticized as Mumbaikar's enterprise in certain publications (Sic).

(6) There is rampant destruction of our natural environment, **(7)** the lack of concern for preservation and conservation of heritage buildings and precincts, **(8)** abuse of native fishing communities, **(9)** violent and forced displacements, etc., are pushing us to a state of uncertainty and instability. Gated developments marketing self-sufficient life-styles are the new buzz-words in real-estate developments offering a get-away from this degeneration. The situation arising from these conditions is leading to slow but steady death of human-rights, security, stability, dignity and social justice thus reflecting the state of under-development of our city. During this systematic and planned onslaught of public-good, there has been a good number of examples of public-action and protracted struggles in the city. The movement of the people of Bandra and Juhu in reclaiming public-space, particularly the water-front, is one important example. **(10)** Co-operative effort – The successful implementation of the water-front projects and their subsequent management and maintenance through collective and co-operative effort stands to challenge the depletion and colonization of spaces in the city. To my mind, cities cannot be seen as a situation of competing spaces but has to be understood as an opportunity for co-operation and co-operative action. **(11)** Bandra Project details – **(11a)** The success of

the Bandstand and Carter Road projects throws up a number of larger issues pertaining to the promotion of an all inclusive planning and design process with citizens' participation. One must reflect on the role of the architect and other professionals in planning and development for the public interest. **(11 b)** Significantly, professionals from various fields brought their expertise to the Bandra project. Architects, conservationists, engineers, /environmentalists, historians and sociologists have been involved in the planning and the management. One of the reasons for the success of the projects in Bandra can, to a large extent, be attributed to the dialogue and understanding between the professionals and the active community while evolving a dynamic practice for its implementation. **(11 c)** Initial design prepared by Das was used only to attract the attention and bring together the interested neighbourhood citizens for a discussion of issues concerning public space and the reworking of the waterfront. People then began to understand the different social dimensions of the project and to contribute their views. They were able to comprehend the physicality of the project and the important changes it would bring to their environment and life. Regular discussions of the design and other aspects of its implementation became more and more engaging as more and more people got attracted and involved in this project.

This process whereby a design evolves as a result of peoples' participation, is extremely important. It is also important, in our view, for an architect to realize the significance of strengthening citizens' movements with planning and design ideas and translating their needs and demands to forms of spaces and structures. The architect, therefore, needs to undertake a larger responsibility, to play the role of an activist, and to relate design with larger and more important factors of social and political importance. It is only in this way that the initial design ideas, which might be shaped by individual fancies and limited design objectives, get firmly rooted in the social and cultural framework of popular demands. **(11 d)** In the words of Lewis Mumford, who wrote with reference to his own book titled, 'The Highway and the City' that "Perhaps the best reason for bringing out this book now is that it may still further widen the circle of public discussion, and thus prepare the ground for a more humane order of building and living than that which a money-centered and power-intoxicated economy has seen fit to impose." It is this concern with humane architecture and democratic living that underpins our struggle to beautify and humanize the landscape of Mumbai.

Conclusion : Similar and many more movements led by different sections and based on different aspects of our city through successful networking can bring to the surface the views from below. It is necessary to propagate the culture of **(12)** public dialogues and protests in order to democratize public space. **(13)** Public action can play a central role in economic development and in bringing social opportunities within the reach of the people as a whole. (Sen and Dreze, 1998:38). What the government ends up doing can be deeply influenced by the pressures that are put on the government by the public' (Sen and Dreze, 1998: 39). There needs to be a paradigm shift in the governments role (and not back-out or operate as facilitator) for development of social-welfare projects including the conservation and development of open-spaces for the public. Bandra and Juhu movements have to some extent achieved this objective and allowed us to revision Mumbai.