



A City without Streets

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**“A city is a place
where a small boy, as
he walks through it,
may see something
that will tell him what
he wants to do his
whole life.”
- Louis Kahn**

I was struck by this quote by Louis Kahn amidst a pile of objective analysis and interrogations about the city - conforming to my own experience of Mumbai.

As a child my journeys in Mumbai, mostly in and around Dadar (in Central Mumbai), were full of encounters with people and places - living, working, worshipping, resting, toiling, hurrying, loitering, eating... houses of all types from road-side shanties to family mansions, shops and businesses of all kinds, metal workshops, carpenters, tailors, bill-board painters, music shops, flower vendors, street acrobats... anything one could possibly imagine. There was a certain chaos, maybe, but not disorder... a creative chaos... the kind out of which life evolves. These travels through Mumbai were an integral part of my learning, like for any child in any city.

It made me aware of the diversity of the community around me, how we shared the same territory and how the built environment allowed this sharing. I realized later how the architectural typologies had this inherent quality to create an environment that was something more than a simple addition of its parts.

The built form defined the public realm giving it a sense of scale and place. It created spaces for all. The façades had depth - a multi-layered skin - shops, verandahs, awnings, projections at street level and galleries, balconies, *chajjas*, sunshades on the floors above. All of this allowed a rich interface between spaces - within and without. There was a 'soft' order that allowed all things to co-exist and evolve much like Nature itself. This was an environment generous of encounters and, referring back to Louis Kahn's words, for the child that I was, each encounter carried in itself the possibility of a different future. I was an integral part of the chaos.

That city has quite naturally changed since. Entire (mill) compounds or individual structures scattered in the city are being redeveloped one after the



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other into taller buildings and gated communities. The taller buildings in most cases rest on parking podiums and the gated communities are self-sufficient islands within high compound walls. In either case what is created is not a living or working space 'in' the city but one that extracts you from it.

The retail activity is organised in malls, open spaces and greenery happen at the podium level leaving a rather desolate street-scape lined with high compound walls or parking podiums. On major arteries, this desolation is further compounded by flyovers. The façades have lost their depth - single layered curtains - abrupt separators of spaces within and without. There may be transparency but no dialogue. There is no street. Every other

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project aspires to be an icon for the city - choosing to stand apart rather than be a part of it.

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Why should Mumbai have a borrowed identity ?



(Photo by Roshni Yehuda)

It is time to question unfounded aspirations to transform Mumbai into a Shanghai or Singapore that are endorsed by our thought leaders. It is a myth that high rise is the only response for high density. I can imagine a far better city with medium rise, mixed use development for mixed income groups and the occasional high rise icon; all of which served by efficient and cost effective transit systems like the BRTS in lieu of the flyovers that we have become a default response to improve intra-city mobility.



City as a Transit Space

the region. The middle income group (MIG) is elbowed out to Nallasopara, Kalyan, Bhoisar, Vasai, Panvel and even beyond and Govandi, Mankhurd, Wadala, Deonar are the new Dharavis catering to the economically weaker sections (EWS).

For some Mumbaikars, the city is only a transit space that links destinations and not an environment they live in or a community they engage with. Their experience of the city is highly predictable and even sterile in the sense that it leaves little scope for the creative chaos which to me is the essence of a city. For others, much larger in numbers, this city is a chimera, on the wretched margins of which they survive.

There seems to be literally no space for dialogue except when claimed by violence and disruption that we do face periodically in Mumbai. Increasingly innocuous incidents provoke disproportionately violent protests. There are many cities already experiencing chronic violence - water riots, food riots, fuel riots, communal riots, vandalism.... Lagos, Mogadishu, Rio, Abidjan, Kingston... like a constant state of war within. If we persist with our madness, Mumbai is on track to be on that list.

One may argue that Architecture only reflects socio-economic reality and did not create it but then what created it? Architecture is certainly a tool to transform this reality and to avoid reinforcing its extremes. It can create a sense of social coherence and equity for the city, more so in a Republic like India. Sustainability is as much a social matter as an environmental one - the city, like the Earth, is also not our inheritance but the legacy for future generations. The Mumbai we are creating today is quite simply, socially unsustainable. Social inequalities are not new to Mumbai but the formal response to them today is.

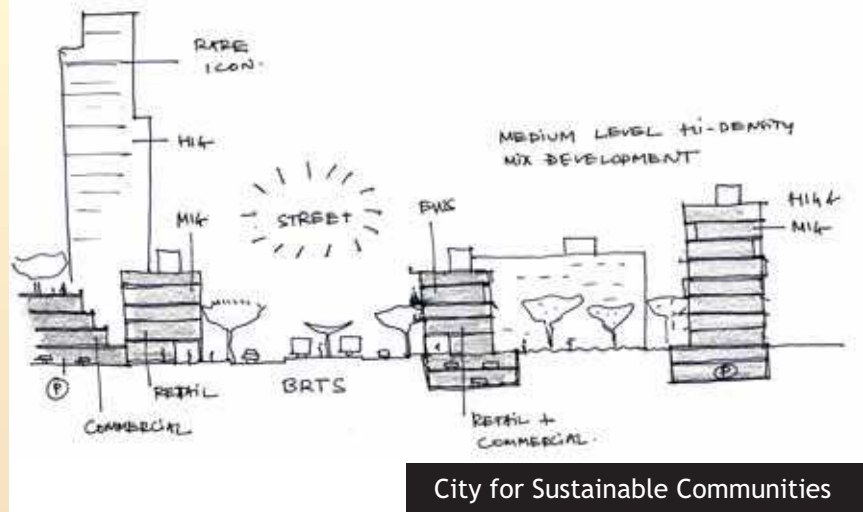


City without streets

The city is a complex phenomenon where the whole is not a sum of its parts, much like the forest and its trees. Its chaos requires 'complex' adaptive systems that create possibilities for communities and not simplistic deterministic ones that create rigid constraints. Prevailing planning models & design typologies tend to conform to the latter. They may be justified in new 'green-field' townships but seem inapt for inner city redevelopment. It is interesting to note that in the 20th century when exact sciences like Mathematics and Physics felt the need to develop an approach to deal with chaos and uncertainty, Architecture lost that very important ability it inherently possessed. We must examine why.

Today's financial capacities and management capabilities can easily afford large projects. An exceptional endeavour like say, Fatehpur Sikri, which would happen once in the life of an empire, happens routinely today. Be it post-industrial redevelopment or new townships, very large areas are planned, designed and set to be developed in a relatively short time span. Nothing really measures to the overwhelming scale of the projects. Nothing counts beyond resolving the financial, programmatic and technological challenges of their big scale. The context / city doesn't figure - nor do people.

Projects of smaller scale are more responsive to specific opportunities and users. They will naturally induce a greater mix of different program components and avoid the stark segregation between commercial, residential - further segregated into luxury,



City for Sustainable Communities

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HIG, MIG, EWS, or retail zones. Smaller projects would require longer time to create an equivalent development. The staggering unsold inventory of residential units and commercial space in Mumbai and the high numbers of retail projects that are frequently re-built are an eloquent statement about the flaws in programming & planning assumption. The unsold inventory is an economic disaster and the short life-cycle of projects is an ecological disaster. Breaking large developments into smaller ones - not just phasing them - would allow the opportunity for course correction in response to real market dynamics and community needs rather than be lead by rosy assumptions made by finance wizards.

Lastly and most importantly, from an urban design perspective, implementing such projects in smaller parts will bring down the scale to include place-making and community building as an inherent part of its Architecture. The large schemes will fit-in better in the existing fabric and with smaller redevelopments and not stand out like mammoths as they do today.

It is time to question unfounded aspirations to transform Mumbai into a Shanghai or Singapore that are endorsed by our thought leaders. It is a myth that high rise is the only response for high density. I can imagine a far better city with medium-rise, mixed-use development for mixed income groups and the occasional high rise icon; all of which served by efficient and cost effective transit systems like the BRTS (Bus Rapid Transit System) in lieu of the flyovers that have become a default response to improve intra-city mobility.

The street is the narrative of a city and as such will change with time but here we are obliterating it. Mumbai is a great city in its own right. I would much rather see it transform into a better Mumbai than to have it adopt a borrowed identity.

Sketches by the Author; Photographs contributed by Ar. Amrit Narkar, Teaching Assistant, AoAM (UA)