

# Mill land boon

*But can Mumbai's civic authorities use it to solve the city's land crunch?*



**ROHIT SHINKRE**

On April 1, 2005 the Mumbai High Court stayed the sale of textile mill lands in the city. The order was a pleasant surprise to many who have, over the years, seen the state machinery degenerating into a handmaiden of real-estate operators. It was also heartening that the court had acted in response to a petition filed by a civil society association, the Bombay Environmental Action Group.

In the 1950s, Mumbai's (then Bombay) civic amenities were at par with the Shanghais of the world. The city had excellent educational institutions, a competent healthcare system and a model public transport system. Today, most of these are in shambles. Decades of inefficient planning, callous administration and vote-oriented politics has transformed Mumbai into a veritable slum. Once the harbinger of the nation's economic growth, the city today is woefully out of steam.

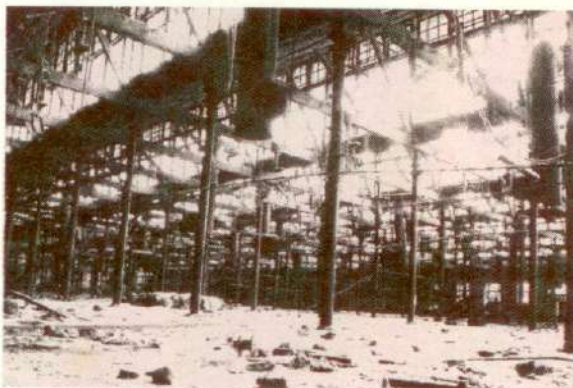
Ironically, Mumbai's defunct textile mills hold out a ray of hope. They occupy about 280 hectares (ha) in the city's heart. It's a precious resource for a city desperately short of land. But will issues related to the redevelopment of this land go beyond real estate coups?

## What are these issues?

Issues related to compensation, pension, employment and housing for the laid off workers remain unresolved. Mill-owners have got away from addressing these issues. But all future proposals to redevelop this land must take care of the housing and employment rights of workers. Let us also not forget that most of these mills were maintained on life support provided by nationalised banks and financial institutions (FIs). This cer-

tainly gives the public a legitimate say in the course of things to come.

Moreover, around 100 ha of the mill lands is with government undertakings. Much of this is severely underused or under illegal use; a lot is also unused. These corporations should restore the land to the city. We do not need public corporations to broker real-estate deals, but we do need land subsidy for housing and other social infrastructure. The precedent set here would be a benchmark for other defunct public undertakings that corner even larger land holdings.



If left totally to private initiative, the mill compounds will surely be replaced by malls, multiplexes and gated residential enclaves. Can the city afford such luxury? No. We have here a unique opportunity to improve civic services, to retain social diversity with adequate housing projects, to strengthen social infrastructure and to support commercial development.

## Architectural heritage

The structure of some of these mills is worth conserving. It's easy to raze them to rubble and lose a piece of the city's history forever. But there are umpteen examples from all over the world where defunct industrial enclaves have been converted into complexes that comprise houses, offices and even museums — without sacrificing their architectural legacy. Mumbai's old quarters such as Byculla, Parel and Lalbaug can also

undergo similar change. A little sensitivity and creativity will ensure that they retain their heritage and not end up as soulless townships.

The sheer scope of this opportunity warrants a different approach. Start with land re-grouping, draft an equitable land-use programme and then implement it by inviting private initiative (wherever possible). There must also be a viable base for cross-subsidising infrastructure development. This will also guarantee the housing rights of Mumbai's mill workers.

But can the existing development

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authorities implement such a complex project? No. Also, private operators must not be allowed to hijack this opportunity. So, there is a strong case for a new 'semi-public' agency with a legal mandate to devise a master-plan and implement it in close consultation with all stakeholders — workers, FIs, mill owners, the municipality, builders, state housing boards and citizens groups. This agency should be disbanded once it serves its mandate.

There is more to urban planning than just regulating real-estate development or constructing high visibility projects like flyovers. Our cities require pragmatic policies to ensure sustainable future. The textile mill lands offer Mumbai a unique opportunity to do that. Let's exploit it. ■

*Rohit Shinkre is a Mumbai-based architect*