

MUMBAI'S GIRANGAON AN URBAN TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

The article looks at the urban planning of Mumbai's industrial centre *Girangaon*, literally 'city of mills', that developed from the 19th till the late 20th century when the textile industry in Mumbai declined till complete closure by 2007. The working-class neighbourhoods around the mills illustrated the key principles of 'New Urbanism' well before their theoretical statement in the 1980s- 90s. Ironically, the urbanism propagated by the recent and ongoing redevelopment of the same precincts are an antithesis of the same principles.

Girangaon

Modern industry came to India in 1856 at Tardeo, Mumbai. It marked a new era in the economic and social conditions of the city which was essentially a colonial trading port till then. The American Civil War (1861-65) drastically affected the supply of cotton and textile to an industrialising Britain. The Suez Canal, completed in 1869, was expected to multiply the volume of trade between Europe and India. In anticipation of this, the British laid the first railway link between the Island City and the mainland in 1857. Within the following decade, there were nine more mills in Byculla, Mazgaon, Parel, Lalbaug, Naigaon, Sewri and Prabhadevi, the *Girangaon*, located about 4 to 6 km north of what was the 'native' or 'black' town, in the Central Mumbai of today. Here resided all the clerks and traders that supported the port, its allied activities and the colonial administration. In urban sociology terms, Mumbai transformed from being a colonial city, characterized by the trade port, naval docks, army cantonment, fortified colonizer's settlement and the adjacent native town to an industrial city of rampant migration, appalling living and working conditions of labour, emergence of an oligarchy of traders and mill-owners, development of railways and the emergence of a working-class culture (Refer Fig. 1). In 1862-62 symbolic of this transformation, the fortifications of the Fort were demolished.



Fig. 1: Colonial and industrial Mumbai
(Source: Author, Base map from Google Earth)

Working-class community and culture

At its peak the textile industry employed 300,000 workers. When the 1982 strike was declared, that number was 250,000. Given the rampant migration there was a pressing need for affordable mass housing. The typology consists of a linear array of single room tenements, sometimes partitioned into a living and kitchen space, served by a corridor and a common sanitary core shared by each floor. This seemed quite suitable to the climate and social ethos of the workers of Girangaon. The reason could be that though there was diversity in the workers' population, a vast majority came from the Konkan region of Western Maharashtra. Sports, games like *kabaddi*, *kho-kho*, *atyapatya*, performing arts and religious rituals from the native Konkan flourished in Mumbai with new metropolitan influences. Chawls were developed mostly by private and sometimes by public initiative¹. Mill-owners themselves built chawls or encouraged private investors assuring them of rental revenue. Affordable rental housing was thus available to support the industry.

An urban community: well-equipped and well connected

The chawls were within walking or cycling distance from the mills. The district was well equipped with schools, playgrounds, markets, etc. Kids would walk to the school or the playground. The ground floor street fronts were commercial and retail. Groceries and other necessities were thus in proximity. Innumerable *krida mandals* (sports associations), *bachat gats* (cooperative groups), *mahila mandals* (women's groups), etc. supported an active community or associative life. Intermediate space between the chawls was shared and used for various

community activities. There was 'sharing' at different scales: neighbours shared newspapers and appliances, the corridor and the sanitary core was shared by the floor, and whole chawl shared the courtyard and the shrine. The *maidan* and the school served a cluster of chawls so on and so forth.

By the 1910s, cultural institutions like *Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya*, the Hanuman theatre, Damodar Hall, etc. were established. Naataks or plays are a very important trait of Maharashtra culture in general and more so of Konkani culture. Many amateur and few professional troupes were based here. The cinema halls- Hindmata, Bharat Mata, Chitra Talkies and Deepak Talkies- started in the 1940s.

Girangaon is traversed by arterial roads and rail transit networks. Access to local and regional transits is convenient, with city and state buses, trams, western and central railways. The State Transport bus stands in Parel and Naigaon were a much-used link to the Konkan. Mobility was assured. A unique metropolitan culture that distinguished Mumbai from other Indian cities emerged here.

Principles of New Urbanism

After noting the many dysfunctionalities of the automobile-centric, single-use zoning-based post-war city planning in America and Europe from the early sixties, many architects and urban thinkers² advocated a return to community-based planning. Even before the new charter for A New Urbanism³ was elaborated by the early 1990s, *Girangaon* already demonstrated all its key principles (Refer Fig. 2) :



- Railwaylines & station
- Arterial road , Tramway
- Mill compound
- Healthcare
 - 1. KEM hospital
 - 2. Wadia women and children
 - 3. Haffkine Institute
- Education
 - 1.Social service league
 - 2.Railway employees school
- Cultural / Recreational
 - 1. Damodar hall
 - 2. Hindmata Theatre
 - 3. Mumbai marathi granthalaya
 - 4. Deepak talkies
- Maidans and Gardens

Fig. 2: 1 square kilometre of Girangaon
(Source: Author, Base map from Google Earth)

- *Mixed use*: The mills, the housing of various social groups, the market and institutional buildings were all in proximity. This always made for an animated public realm which was safe and secure.
- *Social mix*: Mill, railways and port employees of all grades, from workers to executives; caste, religion etc., lived in the same neighbourhood. There was no 'ghetto' formation, and the city-form was not an expression of social segregation.
- *Walkability*: The neighbourhood offered everything- live, work, play, within a pedestrian or cycling radius. There was no daily commute. The urban fabric was permeable to pedestrian movement.
- *High density, medium-rise built form*: Sustainable urban form and occupation that could counter the sprawl of the post-war cities (in the US and Europe)
- *Architectural value*: Resilient composite construction in stone, bricks, timber and metal. Simple adaptable architectural typology that could serve occupants for a long time.

Community-centric planning traditional neighbourhood

Educational, healthcare and cultural institutions and maidans and parks were integral part of the neighbourhood. There was strong scope for 'sharing' at different scales.

Urban form and society

All of the above made for a vibrant and lively city and an extraordinary quality of (community) life. The chawl was an appropriate example of affordable rental housing in that context and era. Likewise, *Girangaon* was an excellent example of sustainable community-centric urbanism. The built environment facilitated social interaction and hence organisation. There was 'space' for an active community life. A strong sense of shared well being and progress made *Girangaon* a natural hub of intense cultural and political activity. It was the centre of unionism and political activism since the pre-Independence era and the hub for the *Sanyukta Maharashtra* movement post-Independence. Many an eminent personality from different spheres - politics, literature, social reform, cinema - B.R. Ambedkar, N.M. Joshi, Narayan Surve, *Shahir* Amar Sheikh, Pralhad Keshav Atre, Dada Kondke and others rose from this background.

The redeveloped Girangaon

Since the closure of the mills, the reuse of the mill compounds and their neighbourhood precincts is perhaps inevitable. Its model is questionable, more so given its urban legacy. Many redevelopment projects have already cropped up, many are under construction or proposed. The current urbanism, of gated compounds, parking podiums and elevated recreation spaces and amenities amidst elevated flyovers is integrally antithetical to the principles of new urbanism.

1. Mixed use is restricted.
2. The social mix does prevail but in a highly segregated form of sale and rehab blocks. With prosperity comes the need for a 'pure identity'.
3. Impermeable gated compounds, elevated podiums and flyovers severely impact walkability. One cannot be a *flaneur* here anymore. The street here is now merely for transit preferably by car.
4. The new high rises with luxurious apartments would make for a low density but for the *rehabilitated* residents of the *rehab* buildings.

5. The value resides not in the architectural or urban quality but in the provision of privatised amenities, double height entrance lobbies and 'bespoke' interior finishes and provision.

6. This fragmented and rigid urbanism undermines adaptability and thus community resilience.

Community life is squeezed into the setbacks and corridors of the rehab building and only occasionally tolerated beyond on grand festivals like *Govinda* and *Ganesh utsav*, almost as a release mechanism. The emerging environment is practically anti-city as it is unlikely to support any form of social organisation and political activity. These have shifted to the virtual space.

Endnotes

¹ BDD chawls developed by the Bombay Improvement Trust from 1930s - 1950s stretch all the way from Worli to Sewri.

² Patrick Geddes, Leon Krier. (1984). *Urban Components*, Architectural Design, Vol. 54, no 7/8; Christopher Alexander (1977) *Pattern Language*; Lewis Mumford *Culture of Cities* (1938) and *City in History* (1961), Jane Jacobs (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* laid the basis of what was to be later defined as *New Urbanism*.

³ Charter inspired from <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism> and <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism>.

References

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3. *House types in Mumbai*. CRIT 2007. From: <http://crit.in/initiatives/housing/housing-typologies/>
4. *Principles of Urbanism*. From: <http://www.newurbanism.org/newurbanism/principles.html>
5. *The Charter of the New Urbanism*. From: <https://www.cnu.org/who-we-are/charter-new-urbanism>



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