

An economic zone against all odds

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Volume 32, Columbia University, New York, 2012

Dharavi, located in Mumbai, India, has the dubious honor of being one of the most economically productive informal settlements in the world. Playing a pivotal role in the local and national economy while being critically underserved and politically marginalized paradoxically makes it both central and peripheral at the same time. It is in this milieu that Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava have carved out their urban action-research platform URBZ, which they founded together with Geeta Mehta. Agata Jaworska got in touch with them to discuss Dharavi's role as a productive force and urban phenomenon.

AJ: Dharavi is one of the rare situations in which a slum presents an opportunity. How did this unique situation come to be?

ME&RS: Actually, what is or is not a slum is not so clear-cut. The reality this word is supposed to describe shifts from context to context. In Mumbai, people living in areas identified as slums by the government or referred as such by the media, city builders, and politicians, often take great pains to point out that their neighborhoods are not slums at all. Sometimes they are old urban villages that had sublet pieces of land to poor migrants; their low-rise high-density form made urban authorities refer to them as slums. In other cases migrant communities were patronized by politicians who allowed them to settle on government land. The settlers were promised a place in the city in exchange for votes. They did not see themselves as encroachers or squatters since their move was sanctioned by official authorities. The history of these neighborhoods is often forgotten. Many of them have grown into busy zones of economic activity and livelihood. Their residents contribute to the city's life in major ways. Their presence has turned Mumbai into the best-served city in India, perhaps in the world. They are an affordable workforce and need affordable housing.

Dharavi emerged along with other such settlements. It is not a city within a city, nor is it the exception that it is often portrayed as being. It grew around mangrove creeks on the outer edges of the colonial city. Its historical epicenter is Dharavee Koliwada, a four century-old tribal fishing village. Dharavi is particularly well-known since the city grew around it. Once at the periphery of the colonial city, it attracted leather workers and others who had no other place to go. It is now at the center of Greater Mumbai, strategically located along two major railway tracks, minutes away from one of India's major corporate hubs, the Bandra-Kurla Complex. Dharavi has become famous for its activities that are plugged into the city's trading, manufacturing, and service sectors.

We see this situation as one it actually shares with many other settlements. It is connected to its spatial organization that happens to combine work and living

conditions characterized by the form we refer to as the 'tool-house'. This allows for a whole lot of manufacturing, retailing, and trading activities to function from this mixed-use condition.

A combination of greed, prejudice, and ideological bias prevents the authorities from supporting the incremental, locally-driven development of Dharavi. The labeling of it as a 'slum' has the perverse effect of delegitimizing a neighborhood altogether and thus justifying the lack of provision of public services. This is because slum dwellers are perceived as squatters who have no rights to the city. Thus, the label of 'slum' is itself the biggest obstacle in the improvement of the quality of life in Dharavi and other such settlements. This is why through actual and conceptual intervention we aim at normalizing a neighborhood that doesn't have much to gain from being described as an exception. What we should recognize is that Dharavi is a natural urban formation, unique and banal at once. It is the tip of the iceberg. Dharavi is urban India at its best, because it is a testimony to the capacity of people to lift themselves up against all odds; and at its worst because it also has the messed up aspect of a creature that was beaten up, marginalized and oppressed by powerful forces over too many years.

The category 'slum' is considered to be the antonym of what is supposed to be the formal city. The formal city itself is a notion suspended somewhere in our collective imaginary. A fantasy that only the most developed East Asian and North European nations succeed in upholding in the urbanism of their cities. In Mumbai the formal city evokes high-rise blocks in segregated zones, connected by motorways, flyovers, sea links and (perhaps someday) monorails, and a neat division of functions between residential, recreational (i.e. shopping), and working quarters. This image is so twentieth century! Especially when we know that at the heart of what we consider to be the formal world's economy is the web - that incredibly free and user-driven system - and global finance, which rides on deregulation, borderlessness, risk-taking, and cocaine.

In fact binary categories like the formal and the informal become rigid formulations that don't do justice to the urban dynamics that exist in a city as diverse as Mumbai.

Dharavi and many other settlements like it are fully plugged into the economic dynamics of the city. Their mixed use spatial logic and cheap labor supply support the activity of large-scale corporate groups through manufacturing and retail or by providing services at cheap rates.

Seventy percent of the total workforce is said to belong to the 'informal' sector. And matching this figure is the overwhelming population that is supposedly living in 'slums' as well. If this is the dominant condition how can the economy and the settlements be referred to as informal, marginal, or peripheral?

AJ: Dharavi came to exist because of the lack of infrastructure ↯ any area that was serviced would have been unsuitable, as affordability was the key

determining factor. If Dharavi gets serviced, will it still exist? How would retrofitting infrastructure change its dynamics?

ME&RS: Actually a close observation of Dharavi's history reveals an incremental growth of infrastructure over a long period of time. Schools, roads, and community toilets have been built over decades. Sometimes with state support, sometimes entirely by the state, sometimes privately and sometimes through community initiatives. Compared to other neighborhoods identified as slums, many parts of Dharavi are decently serviced, though the scope for improvement is tremendous. Municipal authorities often have to be bribed to fix a pipe. Electricity is legally provided by private companies, metered and paid for. The proportion of toilets per capita is low. Only those few who can afford to have them built, have them at home. Some just don't have enough space or resources and have to use community toilets or the streets themselves. This state of affairs is something that is connected to civic clout and varies street by street, or neighborhood by neighborhood. If Dharavi gets improved services, it will still exist, and better than ever before, but only if such improvements are not clubbed with wholesale changes in the built-form of the neighborhood.

AJ: While governments are busy setting up special economic zones, Dharavi has self-established itself as one. Could this economic hub have come to exist with government involvement? How do you think the government can now plug in?

ME&RS: If the government had appreciated how the artisanal energy found in the communities here provided highly-skilled but cheap labor to the city, they would have connected these efficiently to the emerging industrial and service sector. Then the story of Mumbai would have been different. Right now the efficiency of Dharavi is connected to its spatial logic, the autonomy and independence that its small-scale economic units enjoy and the presence of community histories embedded in the neighborhood.

Dharavi residents refer to the area as a special economic zone in an ironic manner, often with sarcasm. After all, most special economic zones are pampered with facilities. The opposite is true of Dharavi.

For this one can attribute prejudice and ignorance, or a combination of the two as the main reasons. Privileged classes in India are used to a high level of subsidized labor and a cheap service economy, shaped by older modes of social stratification. To have entire neighborhoods living in poorly serviced conditions, where the service providers are badly paid is completely acceptable to them. Such neighborhoods can exist cheek by jowl with privileged ones. Since they often emerge on government land, or by paying cheap rent to small-time landlords, their presence is seen to be the result of charity or disrepute. When market forces start eyeing that land, for real-estate development, the 'slum-dwellers' are seen as encroachers and squatters, with their continued presence there being constantly under threat of demolition.

The state or municipal authorities, which had been complicit in the development of such neighborhoods in the first place, then start to work hand-in-glove with developers and try to clear them out. Neighborhoods with stronger political clout manage to survive these maneuvers to a certain degree. Dharavi, through its density, demographics, and political clout has managed to push forth its own agenda fairly successfully, but is under threat now by the weight of its inaccurate reputation as a 'slum'.

AJ: Almost all companies in Mumbai have some sort of contact with Dharavi – whether through products or with waste. Can you tell us more about some of these connections with Mumbai, India, and the rest of the world? How does informal Dharavi interact with the formal world?

ME&RS: It would be best not to look at Mumbai as framed by formal and informal channels. But as a web of activities located in different neighbourhoods, each with their own advantages and strengths. There are people working for multi-national companies as secretaries, drivers, security guards in so-called formal spaces, but they themselves live in neighborhoods qualified as 'informal'. In their homes, other family members are making small components that are then sent off to assembling units that produce taxed goods. Many shopping malls may have products, in their restaurants or in shops, made in settlements like Dharavi. Export of goods, especially leather and clothes, from Dharavi to countries around the world is fairly well-known. Within Dharavi, residents are provided with goods and services by local agents all the time. The neighborhood is a hub for exchange of goods and services from throughout the city. Its central location, connected to all three railway lines – western, central and harbor – as well as by bus-networks, makes it a very convenient transaction point. Recycling of waste is a major chunk of its economic activity and is networked all through the city through agents, collectors and suppliers. Material comes by hand carts, taxis, trucks, and trains. Local construction activities are another substantial economic activity. Dharavi is a market for cement, bricks, pipes, and other construction material, and is constantly building and rebuilding structures all over the neighborhood. Dharavi interacts with the city, country, and world pretty much using all existing resources – mainly through agents, business networks, the city's transport systems, and mobile and communication devices.

It would be interesting to turn this question on its head and ask how 'formal' middle-class residential buildings in Mumbai are connected to the city around them. A typical high-rise apartment block is serviced by dozens of unregistered workers on every floor: guards, cleaners, maids, cooks, nannies, drivers, and an army of deliverymen. Its residents often work from home (without commercial license), download all kinds of files from the net, hide gold from the surveyor, transfer cash to foreign accounts, pay bribes to officials, buy real estate in cash and so on. What we need is a new way to think about production and services in the city. In a study we are currently conducting in Dharavi, we are looking at mobility from the point of view of home-based economic activities. What we are observing is that the house is connected to the city through a constant flux of goods and people moving in

and out. Our cities are not organized in formal and informal zones. The division between the center and the periphery are blurred. The city's activities are organized in webs and hubs that span across places and classes. On one level Dharavi is one such hub. On another, it is a collection of small producers themselves clustered in different parts of the neighborhoods, working in a networked fashion, each according to their own traditions and specializations.

AJ: For Dharavi to have a leading position within economic chains, it possibly needs to shift from executing orders to also initiating them. Can we expect that to happen in Dharavi? How would you describe the role that Dharavi fulfills within national and international chains?

ME&RS: Dharavi's strengths are in recycling, manufacturing, construction, and services. Its localization at the center of the city, its spatial logic, its deep social networks, its cultural diversity, its extreme density and clustering of activities, are strategic advantages in the domestic and global market. We are not sure if we can simply project the wisdom of the day in terms of planning and development onto Dharavi's future. Not everyone aspires to be a designer. Optimizing the production process is itself a creative activity, which can be valued for its own sake. Of course, Dharavi is not one homogenous space or system. It is perfectly feasible for some industries and activities to establish leadership in the larger market and start initiating more orders. In fact, this has been happening for a long time in some industries. For instance, the potters sell products that they have designed themselves. Lots of leatherwork is designed locally as well. However, to mark that out as a joint aspiration for the whole neighborhood does not really make sense. Nothing can be pushed onto the neighbourhood. Its strength is its ability to reinvent itself constantly. To appreciate its logic we need to accept its existing specializations as well as its multi-zonal mind-set. Dharavi is deeply connected to the wider economic systems at large, not as one consolidated neighborhood, but through its own very diverse and adaptable systems. To visualize it as a distinct, holistic sub-system and then imagine its transformation through taking a position of leadership, falls back in the trap of thinking of neighborhoods as planned, zoned spaces in their most ideal form.

AJ: The likes of Harvard, Droog, The Economist, Domus and many others study Dharavi. It is a goldmine for case studies in business, urban planning, architecture, design, recycling, (etc.), becoming a central point of reference for research across disciplines. Why is the world looking at Dharavi and what does it hope to learn?

ME&RS: Actually if we come here looking for case studies that are framed in conventional practices then we will be disappointed. What is commendable about Dharavi is certainly linked to its ability of creating a functioning vibrant economic environment from very little support and capital. It managed to do this by relying on community networks that are deeply connected to native homes. At the same time native histories for most communities were connected to feudal oppressive relations

and caste prejudice. Migrating to the city meant freeing oneself from those older histories. The desperation, freedom, and liberation, along with making the most of very little in a new environment – often by accepting very poorly serviced conditions – are all aspects of Dharavi's 'success' story, but cannot be put in a business case-study. One can hardly turn those histories into economic models! However, what one can do is look carefully at what aspects of its functioning can inform contemporary urban environments, so we respect it when we see it elsewhere. Our studies indicate that its spatial logic, collapse of live-work functions, low-rise high-density structures that incrementally grow over time, the presence of community-based support structures are parts of a larger functioning system, that may help us understand how urban neighborhoods in different parts of the world can stimulate a similar local economic dynamism. This is definitely worth a study. These conditions allow for a collective upward social and urban mobility of neighborhoods in a manner that builds on internal resources of the residing communities and allows them to respond to economic needs in an efficient manner and with lower risks involved. Having multiple sources of incomes, creating value through spatial development, renting and sub-letting, manufacturing and trading, creating creative co-dependencies between individuals, groups and families, keeping alive connections with native histories, and also investing in new opportunities through education, are all factors that have helped Dharavi and neighborhoods like Dharavi transform themselves in a manner that is worth understanding and then emulating. Besides this, its ability of providing highly skilled labor services relying on community skills connected to artisanal histories, but which now adapt to industrial and post-industrial activities, is another special feature that needs to be documented and understood.

AJ: Has all the attention and admiration from the formal world changed the way Dalits – a marginalized group of people in India traditionally regarded as 'untouchable' – are perceived and their role in society? Does the economic success story translate into a social success story?

ME&RS: The fact that Dharavi has the largest presence of Dalit communities in the city is hardly ever foregrounded in discussions about the neighborhood, at least in the mainstream media. As it is, positive discrimination and affirmative action are touchy topics for dominant classes in the city. In fact, the temporary subsidies or rights of use of government land by poor migrant communities is resented much in the same way as reservation for jobs and educational opportunities for Dalit and other marginal communities.

However, it is also true that the Dalit identity is not something that many residents actively use in their daily lives. In many ways, neighborhoods like Dharavi allow for reinvention of identities which try and erase marginality connected to older names and histories. Yet, this is a complex game. Political parties use caste as an active principle at times and as subordinate at others.

The role of caste in Dharavi's economic and social success is not often understood or appreciated enough, except by some enthusiastic scholars and activists. It is true

though that today the global attention to the special economic history of Dharavi has made the media more aware. But this does not often translate into a deeper appreciation that transforms into productive policies. For most of the time the fact that economic success is not reflected in civic infrastructure only reinforces the idea that the 'slum' needs to be erased. When this happens, off goes its economic dynamism. What it needs really is better provision of services and improvement of its environment without destroying its existing built-environment, allowing for a gradual incremental logic to unfold in a manner that foregrounds its economic functions. For this some deep-rooted prejudice against some of the communities that make the human fabric of Dharavi must be overcome.

AJ: Dharavi attracts people from across India, attaining a certain kind of density and diversity. When people converge in one place, they usually reinvent their identity. Is that happening in Dharavi?

ME&RS: Yes, certainly. We have documented hundreds of religious shrines in the locality. These reveal the regional affiliations and traditional background of different residents and communities of Dharavi residents. Each shrine is a story of reinvention and transformation, a play of remembering and forgetting caste and ethnic identities and celebrating new freedoms.

India's most definitive leaders, Gandhi and Ambedkar did not see eye to eye as far as stories of caste histories went. Gandhi glorified an imagined Indian village and its functional division of labor as the fulcrum for Indian society. Ambedkar was firm that erasing the past, leaving the village and moving to the city was a more reliable means to genuine liberation from caste. In a paradoxical way, Gandhi's imagined, hardworking, productive, artisanal village was actualized in urban settlements like Dharavi, which also became a site for Ambedkar's dreams to be actualized in terms of transcending caste and achieving freedoms. At a symbolic level, a nod of acknowledgment towards each other, by Gandhi and Ambedkar, can only be visualized in a place like Dharavi. It would never have happened in reality during their lifetimes.

However even at a symbolic level, such an acknowledgment can only happen if Dharavi is respected and transformed in a manner that can continue to host and provide opportunities for waves of new migrant communities of different backgrounds to keep creating opportunities. Unfortunately the present urban imagination in terms of policies everywhere in the world is not in a position to facilitate this.

AJ: Is Dharavi sustainable? What is the future of Dharavi?

ME&RS: In many ways, Dharavi is a manifestation of a set of urban processes that we believe belong to the trajectory of a 'natural' city. This oxymoron is our way of saying that positing the city as a hard-wired counterpoint to 'nature' and thus seeing it solely as a variable of human intervention and control is ultimately what makes

them become totalized, over-controlled, sterilized spaces. That only encourages landscapes that are speculatively financed, producing miles of built forms and real estate development, neatly segregated into zones of recreation, residences, and livelihood. In the process of constructing ideal cities, so much investment is made that no one sees how economic vitality is often leached out of human lives and put into buildings and boulevards, creating brittle and vulnerable cities in the long run.

As a natural city, the historical development of Dharavi has been a testimony to the ability of residents to create dynamic environments. However physically impoverished, they are nevertheless indicative of possibilities of a better urban future for all. In our minds, the future of Dharavi can be a better one, reflected in the concrete reality of some Tokyo neighborhoods, which often share a template of urban development with Dharavi, but in a much more developed way. Or even in the confidently transforming streets of 'favela' neighborhoods in Sao Paulo. Of course, the hard reality is that urban visions for all are now trapped in rather limited designs and projections. It is highly unlikely that Dharavi will be able to challenge those easily, and be allowed to follow its own trajectory. The ongoing process of urbanization in Mumbai and the world at large is one that erases as much as it builds. Guy Debord said that urbanization negates the city because it deprives neighborhoods of the chance of reproducing and reinventing themselves.

The idea that development must follow a linear trajectory from the slum to the formal city is plainly wrong. Particularly if by formal we mean a certain form of urbanization characterized by high-rise buildings and large motorways. This formal city is a false kind of urbanization. What makes a city a city is the people that inhabit it and the way they interact with each other and their environment, making it their own, constantly balancing between their history, present needs, and aspirations, individually and collectively.

The city is reproduced everyday through the million social or commercial interactions that knit people together. The city should therefore not be understood as a counterpoint to the slum or the village. These are enmeshed in the city's economy, fabric, and ethos.