

## DHARAVI'S CHANGING NATURES

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### ABSTRACT

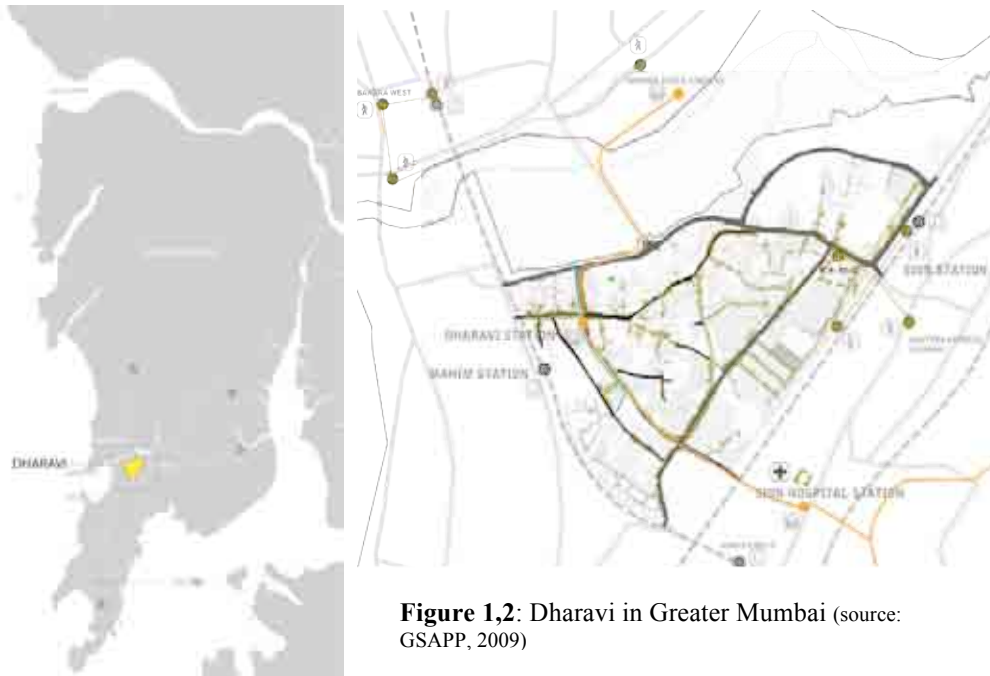
*In an attempt to reach a greater understanding of territorial transformations in slums, this paper discusses in parallel the emergence of touristic activities and the governmental projections for the future of Dharavi; Mumbai's vibrant settlement. By highlighting the role of mediated images in this process, the project aims to examine the critical perspectives of Dharavi's changing natures since 2005. Various experiences of Dharavi's evolution brings into question several levels of understanding the traditional production of spatial configurations and the findings of this project should not be seen as conclusive but more as starting points.*

*Keywords: Dharavi, transformations, slum tours, redevelopment*

### INTRODUCTION

“No one noticed when the tourist route changed to include Dharavi. No one noticed when the term ‘experiential tourism’ was born” (Manju, 2004).

Dharavi is an informal settlement in Mumbai which lacks sanitation, drinking water, electricity and decent housing. With a population of almost 800,000 people in 590 acres (2.4 km<sup>2</sup>), Dharavi is one of the densest areas in India, and was officially recognised as a slum in 1976 (Lynch, 1979). Strategically located in the geographical centre of the city, Dharavi lies among three major railway stations – Sion, Mahim and Matunga – and remains as the juncture of important connections between east and west, plus north and south, Mumbai, with easy access to Chhatrapati Shivaji, Mumbai's International Airport (GSAPP, 2009). As a prime location in the centre of a city which hosts almost 19 million people, Dharavi's land is estimated to be worth more than \$10 billion. Due to its real estate value, it has been in the spotlight of urban projects for the city's future, corresponding with several redevelopment projects. However, this model of spatial transformation has not yet been successful in Dharavi, which still maintains the label of one of Asia's largest slums; a label that inspired the Indian, Krishna Pujari, and the Englishman, Chris Way, to create “Dharavi Slum Tours”.



**Figure 1,2:** Dharavi in Greater Mumbai (source: GSAPP, 2009)

In 2005, Chris and Krishna set up *Reality Tours & Travel* in Mumbai, primarily to explore various possibilities in an Indian slum and eliminate the damaging stereotypes surrounding it. Although touristic activities in slums already existed in the favelas in Brazil, Dharavi's energy is what most inspired the two young entrepreneurs to start their business in Mumbai.

*Reality Tours & Travel* offers three types of tour in Dharavi which aim to highlight the vibrancy of the community but also the economic activity that keeps the settlement active. Dharavi's informal economy contributes 500 million dollars annually to Mumbai's formal economy (Jacobson, 2007) and it is structured around various industries. The tours offer a preview of the recycling community, the pottery colony, food production related activities and a visit to a resident's house.

While tour operators in the city are offering touristic packages of slums, the state Government of Maharashtra has, since 2004, been aiming to transform Dharavi into a "Beautiful City" by 2013 ("Transform Dharavi into a beautiful City", 2004). The Dharavi Redevelopment Project was officially recognised as a public project in January 2004 and since then efforts to transform it have been in the spotlight of various political agendas.

The governmental attempts to eradicate Dharavi's identity as a slum, together with any parallel touristic activities that promote this slum character, bring into question Dharavi's position in the urban future of the city.



**Figure 3:** Reality Tours web (source: <http://realitytoursandtravel.com> )

Analysing the previous challenges, the first section of the paper explores the emergence of Dharavi’s Redevelopment Project in relation to Dharavi’s evolution as a touristic destination. The second section of the paper studies the unexpected growth of Dharavi as a *touristic paradise* that followed the success of the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). The conclusion offers space to examine the debate of how fruitful the slum tours can be for the development of the area and provides insights into the transformations that these tours may bring about in the local economy parallel to the redevelopment process.

Concerning the developing context and the complexities of Dharavi’s emergence as a touristic destination, this paper provides a new perspective for architects and planners in regard to understanding the production of spatial configurations.

### THE REDEVELOPMENT OF ‘ASIA’S LARGEST SLUM’

“Q: I heard that Dharavi is going to be redeveloped. Will I still be able to see the area?” (<http://realitytoursandtravel.com/help/faqs/>).

The immense interest in Dharavi’s territory has corresponded with a series of redevelopment plans since Dharavi was officially recognised as a slum in 1976. This model of housing delivery has not been successful in the past and various hurdles have resulted in the delay of any top-down transformations. This section explores the latest attempt to redevelop Dharavi parallel to the emergence and development of Dharavi slum tours.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Dharavi’s territory was converted into a place of conflict and contestation. The emergence of fresh political and economic dynamics became ingrained in the territory itself. The ongoing struggle for power since 2003 is reflected in a major redevelopment project; the Dharavi Redevelopment Project was initially introduced in 1997 as a private project of the American-trained Indian architect, Mukesh Mehta, who returned to Mumbai to implement his vision of fixing slums. Triggered by predictions of an increase in informality, and with his background as an architect, Mukesh Mehta decided to implement his vision, starting with Dharavi. With Dharavi conceived as a ‘problem’

in Mumbai, the Dharavi Redevelopment Project was approved as a governmental plan in the beginning of 2004, with its implementation being completed by 2013.



Figure 4: Dharavi Redevelopment Project (source: SPARC and KRVI, 2010)

Facing the challenge of a holistic makeover in Dharavi, *Reality Tours and Travel* introduced “Dharavi Slum Tours”. Tourists from all over the world visited Dharavi to document the ‘real India’ before it completely disappeared. However, it is now 2012 and the redevelopment project has not yet started, nor has it been abandoned. Following the triggers that activated tourism in Mumbai’s slum, the following section analyses the impact that an award-winning movie, which was based in Dharavi, has had on the evolution of tourism in the area.

## THE OSCAR DESTINATION PACKAGE

“Take a tour of Slumdog location”, (2009)

This part of the paper approaches the question of Dharavi as a touristic destination within the concept of ‘mediascapes’. As Arjun Appadurai in his work *Modernity at Last* named: “Mediascapes tend to be image-centered, narrative based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places” (Appadurai, 1996:35). For the purpose of that section, it is evaluated the impact that the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* had in the development of Dharavi’s tourism.

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008, when the UK movie *Slumdog Millionaire* was released, the director, Danny Boyle, spoke of his choice to place the movie in Dharavi:

“It was the depiction of Mumbai, a vibrant city of vivid contrasts that attracted me the most!” (“Slumdog Millionaire: Fete of the fests”, 2008).

The movie had great success globally, receiving several awards at the 81<sup>st</sup> Academy awards, and Dharavi soon became an Oscar destination. A global online tourism vendor, *Expedia.com*, promoted the area as one of the “hottest tourism destinations” in 2009. (“After ‘Slumdog...’”, 2009). The movie’s success prompted discussions of and visits to Dharavi. Chris Way and Krishna Pujari reported a 25% increase in Dharavi’s slum tours (Ma, 2010:3). More specifically, while only 3,150 tourists participated in a Dharavi tour in 2008, a year later the attendance increased to 5,370 tourists (Meschkank, 2011). The desire of tourists to revive the mediated images in reality but also their curiosity to explore an unfamiliar world brought them to the slum of Dharavi. According to a survey, three out of four motivations to visit Dharavi were related to curiosity.

The immense increase of tourists in Dharavi also triggered an expansion of tour operations in the slum. Several dwellers saw the economic opportunity that emerged in their slum after the movie and, following the path of Chris Way and Krishna Pujari, new businesses in tourism were born.

In 2009, a local resident started his business, “Mohammed’s Dharavi Slum Tours”, and in the same year “Thomas Tours India” established their own Dharavi tour.

In March, 2010, “Be the Local” tours were created by two locals, Fahim Vora and Tauseef Siddiqui (Bansal, Gandhi and Rodrigues, 2012: 65-67); in 2011, Abdul Hashmir Rafiq, who was raised in Dharavi, introduced his “Incredible Tours and Travels”. Since 2012, “Mumbai Moments” have also been training slum kids to generate employment opportunities and give slum tours an inside perspective of Dharavi.

Today, slum tours are already established and profitable businesses in the area of Dharavi. However, a great challenge is faced when the practices of a slum’s economy overlap with the political economy of the city’s plans. *Slumdog Millionaire* is just one event that intersects with the Dharavi Redevelopment Project. Popular media, literature, documentaries and academic discussions associated with Dharavi have similarly contributed to Dharavi’s emergence as a spectacle.

## CONCLUSION

Behind the enormous success of these touristic activities, not everyone was satisfied with the improved situation in Dharavi. Just after the movie’s release, a major debate emerged between those who argued that slum tours turn poverty into entertainment and those who saw the tours’ contribution to the local economy. Consequently, *reality* tourism obtained several names, such as *poorism* and *poverty tourism*, and became the centre of several conflicts (Selinger and Outtersson, 2009).

The stories presented in this paper are intended to offer an insight into how and why Dharavi emerged as a spectacle but also to assess the possibilities that slum tours might offer to the evolution of a place. In a crucial moment for Dharavi’s urban

future as a slum, the tourism's emergence slowly built up influence against the 'desired' redevelopment project and significantly contributed to empowering the local economy. In 2009, Reality Tours and Travel expanded their work with the NGO, *Reality Gives*, and 80% of the profits of "Dharavi Slum Tours" return back to Dharavi through educational and social activities in the slum. The immense expansion of slum tours in Dharavi just after the movie created new economic opportunities and jobs for local residents, who aimed to use the challenging identity of the slum in order to increase profits in their communities. In addition to that, the increase in Dharavi's popularity supported discussions and projects around the globe. Dharavi's unpredictable present and future brings into question the traditional role of planning and spatial formations. The findings of the study should be used as triggers for further urban research and should not be seen as conclusive but more as starting points.



**Figure 5:** products of Reality Gives (source: <http://www.realitygives.org>)



**Figure 6:** Slum Tours Poster in Central Colaba (source: Dharavi: Documenting Informalities, 2008)

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