

Dharavi: A Construction Site

The view of Dharavi as a dreadful slum has been a challenge for government planners, who were charged with designing for other people's lives without any knowledge of their specific necessities and qualities of their way of life. The process of designing housing under this model involved construction that had a clear beginning and end. However, the true nature of Dharavi's construction goes far beyond these practices: The construction site is itself the end result; the stage upon which the purpose and form of the slum was gradually transformed, a process driven by foreign interests, NGOs, and the residents themselves.

After a nine-year delay, construction on the first experimental building of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) began in February 2013 at the northeast boundary of Dharavi. Encompassing the grand vision of a slum-free, 'world-class' Mumbai, the DRP was the first redevelopment project in India to introduce public and private partnership as a solution to the so-called slum crisis, a condition that had begun to escalate at the beginning of the century. The plan promised to recreate desirable aspects of two successfully transformed 'world-class' cities – Shanghai and Singapore – and implement them within Dharavi's densely populated area of 438 square kilometres. Under the management of the DRP, new high-rise residential and commercial buildings – as they appeared in promotional images – were to be replicated within the area's geographical boundaries and later in other Indian cities.

As the activist Sheela Patel has claimed, this development project went to "the heart of the crisis of modern development practice" in that it attempted to facilitate global competitiveness of Mumbai, while being solely dependent on the technical expertise and financial mechanisms of the private sector.¹ The first building of the project illustrates this familiar approach of applying the vocabulary of comprehensive planning and experimenting with various possibilities of 'fixing' slums in world-class cities. The building as planned would host 356 tenements, housing a small number of Dharavi's 700,000 slum dwellers on its 18 floors. Thrilled by the prospects of this 'dream project', government officials proudly spread the news in September 2013 about the prized construction site in Dharavi and encouraged people to visit it and see the nascent transformation for themselves. But those who do visit are more likely to be struck by the political blindness evident in the government's initial efforts: the one unfinished building of the project is thus far woefully lacking in any trace of social resourcefulness or spatial imagination.

In this respect, there are two ways to see Dharavi as a 'construction site': from the 'outside' perspective of government officials, or from the 'inside' perspective of those living and working there. As the government sees it, this particular site holds much promise for a *slum-free* image of the city meant to satisfy the desire for change through urban purification, albeit a loaded image projected in the meantime onto a single, unfinished building. But anyone familiar with Dharavi's streets and alleys, its residents and their myriad activities perhaps has another image in mind, one, that is, of a dynamic construction site full of hopes and possibilities. *Construction* understood in a more active, generative sense is certainly a more apt depiction of Dharavi *as lived* insofar as it is a territory comprised of people, practices, things, events, as well as the media from both inside and outside of the enclave. **In other**

words, this is a construction site of gradual, often unpredictable change, with no clear beginning or end. Dharavi is a work in progress, originating not only from residents, but also from non-governmental organizations and foreign representatives. In the case of Dharavi, *construction* then connotes multiple levels of mediation that are not limited to the erection of buildings. The incremental process of transformation also entails the building of social and spatial change in a broad sense: the works (or operations) behind constructing a body of knowledge, a global identity and a situated economy. The question here is how these works could serve as a means of successfully bringing about more lasting social and spatial change in a variety of domains.

Constructing a Global Identity

Stereotypes propagated by the media and by cultural events over the last decade have increased Dharavi's popularity as a tourist attraction. One example of this shift of status is the explosive growth of 'slum tourism' in the area following the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, whose release in 2009 exposed Dharavi to a global audience. Even though this brand of tourism had been visible in the settlement since 2006, it is hard to ignore the surge of visitors after film's release. Over night, Dharavi became an Oscar destination. Foreign and domestic visitors thronged to the areas depicted in the movie, while the heightened demand for tourism in turn encouraged local residents to take advantage of newly emergent business opportunities. Apart from ethical issues raised by such a development, it is important to note that Dharavi's recently constructed image and the global popularity ensuing from its newfound publicity have led to an about-face in the fate of the community and its residents.

The current boom in slum tours has contributed to spatial and economic change in the settlement in three significant ways. First, residents and tourists have collaborated in a gradual redevelopment of Dharavi's landscape through relatively small interventions brought about by the following: a) slum dwellers have improved their houses in order to embellish tourist's perception of their settlement; b) a collaboration between tourists and residents has arisen, allowing tourists to share their knowledge with locals and contribute to improvements. Second, 'slum tourism' has contributed to the local economy and created new business opportunities for residents. Third, tourism has helped to dispel the stereotype of Dharavi as Asia's "largest dirty place," even while posing a new stereotype in place of the old one: Dharavi as a 'real' or 'authentic' space.¹ This third change, in particular, has repercussions beyond Dharavi and raises questions about how notions of 'authenticity' come to bear on communities and their spaces.

Constructing Knowledge

The Dharavi-based interactive research platform URBZ has focused on providing alternative methodologies for creative urban development. Unlike the state, URBZ seeks to facilitate the production of knowledge and information to ensure resilience in cities. Going beyond traditional activism and most often working without government directives, this team has created opportunities for residents to express their ideas about what Dharavi could be and to develop alternative strategies for gradually improving their settlement. Instead of focusing strictly on discussions about the DRP, URBZ has opened up the field of inquiry and has tapped into the extraordinary resourcefulness of residents who are interested in transforming their territory. Through various workshops and exhibitions, the URBZ team has identified

¹ Krishna Pujari (founder of Reality Tours & Travel in Mumbai), interview by author, Mumbai, September 14, 2013

several levels of socio-spatial dynamics that might serve to elevate the area to a model of urbanization for the twenty-first century by encouraging residents themselves to gradually transform Dharavi according to their own aspirations – a user generated city. These interventions were the outcome of a link established between residents and researchers around the world who worked together to empower locals and motivate communal participation in planning activities for Dharavi through creativity, innovation and research.

Constructing an Economy

Those who simply assume that life in Dharavi is a Dickensian tale of unmitigated hardship and misery are overlooking incredible social and economic opportunities embedded in the area. Every new migrant entering Dharavi with hopes, dreams and a sense of wonder contributes to its entrepreneurial spirit, making Dharavi a giant labyrinth of resources. It contributes, for example, US\$ 500–600 million annually to Mumbai's economy, in part from its illegal services and unregistered industries.² Its informal industries feed and clothe many of Mumbai's citizens. An economic mosaic, Dharavi features numerous small-scale manufacturing and production units such as restaurants, grocers, and various shops, manifesting the epicentre of light industry and artisan activity, if not the productive heart, of Mumbai.

What is the true nature of Dharavi's construction site? Considered as such in a truly expanded sense, it clearly encompasses multiple levels of human resilience and material resourcefulness, and so, is much more than merely the next real estate opportunity waiting to be seized. This oft neglected reality calls into question the reductive purview of the DRP and its focus on the built environment alone, a short-sighted focus which to date has only resulted in bureaucratic failure and delays in implementation. Additionally, the political impact of local government elections on all levels, the actions of local NGOs and their involvement with political parties as well as a global economic recession have presented formidable obstacles to redevelopment and have exacerbated the disparities between planning propositions and the actual social spaces to be developed. Yet no one can deny that Dharavi has undergone tangible transformations and continues to change from the inside out. Such observations should not be seen as conclusive but rather as a starting point for devising constructive methods and tools that, especially for those involved in the planning process, might used to replace, as Michel Foucault put it, "the abstract, general and monotonous form of 'change' which so easily serves as our means for conceptualizing succession."³

Pictures



Figure 1: Photograph by Martha Kolokotroni, *The first DRP experimental building in Sector 5, Dharavi*, 2013, digital file type

Quotes to blow-up:

- In other words, this is a construction site of gradual, often unpredictable change, with no clear beginning or end.
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¹ Sheela Patel, "Dharavi is in the Midst of a Storm," in *Dharavi: Documenting Informalities*, ed. Jonatan Habib Engqvist and Maria Lantz (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2000): 285.

² Michael Conard, Geeta Mehta and Kate Orff, eds. Mumbai, *Dharavi: Scenarios for Redevelopment*, (New York: GSAPP Studio 2009, Columbia University, 2009).

³ Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991): 55-56.