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Contemporary Urban landscapes, Messy, Smart cities, Ulhasnagar, Urban Memory

## Messy Cities, Tidy Mechanisms: Urban Forms of Contemporary India

Anushka Shahdadpuri

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**ABSTRACT**

Contemporary Indian urbanscapes present a curious spectacle of messy, fuzzy forms with the fancy obsession to mechanization. Altered with the development of modern economic and political systems and social conditions, change in labor forms and practices, and environmental issues, these landscapes have grown into complex, concurrent forms with irregular street layouts, intricate mingling of uses in absence of clear-cut functional zones. However, as a symptom of 'worlding' Indian cities, the growing reliance on cartography, smart technology and data to understand the social and physical challenges of contemporary cities is argued to in fact remove this heterogeneity and real life from them.

Despite these contradictory predicaments, varying claims, urban forms appear to be inherently messy and mixed. The essay is interested in examining the social framework of modern Indian landscapes, which go beyond its formal construct and physical appearance. Given the emergent relationship of cities and its people which in itself offers an opportunity of acknowledging different uses and users, informs this essay's study of the evolving imaginations of *whose* city is it anyway? *Who* builds the city? *What* makes the city?

Premised on lost memory of Ulhasnagar, nostalgia, recent events and mundane stories involving oral life narratives and lived experiences, this paper proposes an alternative lens to envisage urban landscapes through the dynamics of *everyday* as emblematic of its messy logic constantly wrought by overlapping uses, numerous and simultaneous claims.



**Anushka Shahdadpuri** graduated from Pillai College of Architecture. She is the founder of Aamchi, a mentoring, design and research platform centered around embedding culture and critical thinking within the architectural discourse. After her graduation, she worked at the School of Environment and Architecture as a Research Assistant. She presented her paper titled 'Conferences and the Gender Question' at the Gender and Academic Leadership in Architecture in India Symposium, 2020. Anushka is currently a Research Associate at the Social Design Collaborative, Delhi that is working on participatory planning for Delhi's Master plan 2041 as a part of the *Main Bhi Dilli Campagin*.

anushkaaamchi@gmail.com

## Introduction

Historically, cities in India have been kingdoms of fortified walls, warding off the kings and controlling neighboring territory. Owing to the fear of invasion, ancient cities were planned on defensible sites on the river banks, around which developed a whole ecosystem of livelihood activities ranging from farming, trade, commerce and handicrafts. They grew as political-economic centers of kingdoms (Karan, 2007). Their original function was to always maximize control and minimize conflict between opposite worlds (King, 1976). However, this changed drastically with the development of modern economic and political systems. The long period of evolution inundated with distress migration, change in economies, social conditions, change in labor forms and practices, new aspirations, environmental issues and cultural dimensions has substantially altered the way we think of our cities today and produced urban new forms, perceived unlike our traditional cities. It has transformed the cities into incomprehensible landscapes that are characterized by constant negotiations, irregular street layouts, intricate mingling of uses in absence of clear-cut functional zones (Karan, 2007).

Furthermore, with more than 60% of India's population expected to live in urban areas, these incoherent urban entities are anticipated to become the largest urban agglomerations of the 21st century. Therefore, making it critical to think about modern urbanscapes beyond its physical form alone.

## The Idea of Inside and Outside

As modern urban landscapes are concurrent forms playing multitudinous roles, there appears to be a fusion of different functions. For some the city is home, some the city is a place to work, for some the city is a memory, for some the city is a place of worship, beliefs, kinships and so on. A home in the city happens in multiple places, for some it's inside the confined boundary of a house but for many, the city *itself* is the home. For instance, in Mumbai, the entire slum and chawl can be considered home, the common corridors, verandahs, space between the adjoining houses that provides this sense of enclosure and security. More than that, these intimacies and amiability accord the very sense of home where the door barely exists and the idea of inside and outside is perhaps very unclear and fuzzy. The novel coronavirus outbreak and the consequent lockdown have confirmed it. In March, within a week of a lockdown imposed by the government, lakhs of migrants from Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore fled the city to go to their place of birth situated



Figure 1: The sidewalk of Talao Palli lake transforming throughout the day.

hundreds and thousands of kilometers far away. What does this tell us about our imagination of cities with respect to its function? How do we examine the identity of the city here? What role does the city play here? These migrants sleep and house in structures held by flimsy tin sheets. Thus, there is no inside to be locked into. Here *the outside*-predominantly is their home, which provides them this sense of security and dependability-where they develop bonds, networks, and friendships and spend most of their time (but is now shut).

### Ecology of Social Enterprise

Since the recent past, urban landscapes in India are also seen as a canvas on which social activity unfolds. This is to say that beyond the defining features of the city- density, diversity and size that provide contention to develop, cities are laboratories where new associations are forged or the battlegrounds where antagonistic appeals pit for domination (Kong and Law, 2002).

For instance, the Shaheen baug, in Delhi, opened a new world for women, where they could be seen and heard. This was not an 'urban social movement' by itself, but the city served as strategic space through which the stigmatized minority was able to assert broad claims in the entire nation. The cries of "*inquallab zindabad*", "*Bol do lab azad hai tere*" (speak, your lips are free) occupied the park and city streets for the largest women led movement since the freedom struggle. The city here demonstrated a site of coordination, connection, and concentration. The emerging forms of life, publics and place-making saw the making of a city reconfigured by the normalization of barricades into a space for all (Zaidi and Pani, 2020). There were kids, women, working women, parents, teachers, teenagers, grandparents, farmers, musicians, dancers, elites, super elites, middle-class and communal transforming the city into a secular space, hangout zone, and safe space for women, open library, gala zone and night market.

Clearly the contemporary cities go beyond their obvious differences to establish a much richer relationship, both spatially and metaphorically, than their physical manifestations would suggest (Mehrotra, 2008).



**Figure 2:** An illustration by Sameer Kulavoor of the Protests at Shaheen Baugh, Delhi. Exhibited at Tarq, Mumbai.

Consequently, these relationships are also evident in the way cities thrive and operate. The informal economy of many Indian cities illustrates an overlap and intertwined existence of various objects, claims and activities. For instance, the streets in many Indian cities are occupied by the street-vendors, pedestrians, homeless people, kids to play, neighbors to chat. The same space is used by multiple people at various times, sometimes they even co-exist. Like two vegetable vendors operate by occupying the same space- one sells leafy vegetables, while the other sells potatoes and onions. When one goes to take a small nap in the afternoon, the other operates for him. Sometimes the flower vendors occupy a space in the morning, after which the retailers and vegetable vendors operate there during the afternoon and finally the same space is taken over by vendors selling garments, shoes, make-up and jewelry in the evening.

Though the form of contemporary cities appears to be inherently messy and mixed, it acknowledges and supports the lives and livelihood of the people, where these urban conditions are produced by overlapping uses, numerous and simultaneous claims in the same space every day (Shetty and Gupte, 2012). The image of the city is not merely one-directional and static. Its form is ever changing and morphing.

### **Between Reality and Aspiration**

However, with the fancy obsession to mechanization, cities in the 21st century have largely been conceived as smart objects developed by western technologies, exported all over the world (Indian Architect & Builder, 2015). This smart technology has heavy reliance on computer analysis and big data to understand the social and physical challenges of contemporary cities. The concept dates back to 2014, with the launch of DataLA. The



Figure 3: Streets of Tembli Naka, Thane, transformed during seven days of Navatri celebration

mayor of Los Angeles issued an executive order instructing each city department to gather all data and share it on a publicly accessible online portal- *DataLA* (Vallianatos, M, 2015). This aimed at a generation which had grown up with smartphones, the Internet. The data and analysis were intended to spur interventions in the city that would help to regulate everything right from crime rates to unemployment to traffic.

A similar trait was adopted by PM Narendra Modi soon after coming to office in 2014; he announced an urban agenda in the form of 100 new Smart Cities for the country. As a result, The National Smart Cities mission (NSCM) was implemented by the Government of India, under which the Union Ministry of Urban Development was responsible for implementing the mission in collaboration with the state governments of the respective cities (MoHUA, 2015). The NSCM envisioned developing an area within the cities as *model areas*. The model areas are developing as replicable models which will act like a *lighthouse* to both within and outside the Smart City. (Smart cities Mission, 2015). The mission employs area-based development to incorporate retrofitting and greenfield development in these cities with a heavy reliance on technology, data and mapping.

In many ways this method provides a formal framework and mechanization to create and shape modern cities through completion and perfection. This process further epitomizes the use of coding, algorithms and GIS mapping to shape strong infrastructure, smart

environment, smart people, smart living, smart economy, and smart governance. Together, the area-based development and urban intelligence forms the backbone of the smart city mission. Such clarity and rigidity of data and algorithms predominantly presents two predicaments -

1. **Perfect Cities-** The algorithmic logic of data driven urbanism predominantly deals with the physical appearance of the city making, perfecting, efficiency, completing in terms of production and returns. But that is not how Indian cities operate. In contemporary India, these urbanscapes of India are unfinished edges, messy forms defined through landscapes of pluralities. And at another level, it is this system of collecting data, which itself poses a sharp contradiction with the form of life in Indian cities. It has an inability to deal with heterogeneity of the networks of people, claims, relationships, the different roles that the city plays.
2. **Model cities-** A situation where the modern urban practices have evolved blanket practices that have resulted into singular operations which require clear boundaries not only to execute ideas but also to think about spaces and plan them. This has altered the way we see and understand the contemporary city forms by implying all cities in India will be recast as model cities in the same image- resulting in monotony of urban form.

For contemporary urban landscapes to reflect the *form of lives in cities*, we need to think beyond the *form of the city*. The emergent relationship of our cities and its people in itself offers an opportunity of acknowledging different uses and interest groups, and demands new imaginations of our contemporary urban landscapes that are embedded in the working of cities. These go beyond the formal construct and physical appearance of our cities.

### **Memory of Ulhasnagar:**

#### **It's not the form of the city, but the people, life and memory**

Consider this example of Ulhasnagar. I was born in Ulhasnagar, the city built by refugees of Sindh, built as a camp city, later transformed into a small and medium scale industry for electronics, textile, furniture, machinery and is officially considered to be an illegal city and a civic shame. Not only is 80 percent of the city illegally constructed *by its people*, but worse still it has all kinds of enterprises and commerce mingled in the greatest complexities with its residents. It has one of the highest density growth, with very little park spaces. Everything conceivable is presumably wrong in Ulhasnagar paradoxically known as the *city of joy*. Like Jane Jacobs states in orthodoxical planning terms, it is a three-dimensional textbook of 'megalopolis' in the last stage of depravity.

However, here in the entrepreneurial city, mingled all among the buildings for living are sumptuous *kirana* stores, cottage industries, selling from papads (Sindhi delicacy) to pillow covers, petticoats, jeans, plastic utensils, home-made pickles, sarees, jewelry, soaps and



**Figure 4:** A typical Kirana House on a street in Ulhasnagar depicting the fuzzy ownership.

everything else one can think of. The life here springs out on the streets, entrance of the houses, the space outside the house, front of the neighbor's (very often relatives) house. Here evening snacks and food travels faster than gossip, where neighbors do not have to knock on your doors before entering. Instead of super-blocks and evenly designed monolithic blocks, the city is constructed in a haphazard manner by the people suiting their logic and aspirations. It has dense blocks with porous networks of old, aging buildings and badly shaped in between spaces. The atmosphere of the city reflects in the sphere of amiability, kinships, good health, where people are either chatting, observing, shopping, strolling. Over the years, the city has attracted a large population across surrounding cities for majorly three reasons- cheap housing, entrepreneurial -jugaadu spirit and all-embracing hospitality of its people.

In 2000, however, my father decided to move to Thane, a suburb in Mumbai, some 30 kms away from Ulhasnagar for better connectivity to the main-city and to upgrade the standard of living. On the other hand, my grandparents didn't conceive the same logic, even after moving to a much better space in terms of the room area, amenities in the form of shopping malls, clubhouses, huge lawns, my grandma always wanted to go back to the old congested city. Here is a curious thing-- the social susceptibility of the city attracts people and perhaps endorses the city *as the city of joy* but does not concur with the ideas of 'good urban form'.

For my grandma, the networks, relationships, neighbors and everyday life mattered much more than the space, property and spatial form of the city. There she knew everyone from the shopkeeper to the maid of our neighbor's house. In fact, everyone knew everyone there. The shopkeeper Ramesh, when he got married, invited us all to his marriage. She recalls "*woh bhi kya mehnat wale din the, hum papad bhi ghar par banate the*". They made *papad* (sindhi delicacy) at home in those days, with all the *bhabhis* collecting on the *chhath* (terrace) of the house to help make the dough for hours. This was also the time when they

would all catch up in the absence of the men of the house and talk, gossip freely. They would on a rolling basis collect at every household to help in this preparation of papad for several days. In the evenings she would take a walk outside and share a smile with everyone on the street. The absence of an intercom was never a deterrent; everyone was just a loud call away.

### **Messy Cities, Tidy Mechanisms**

There are similar stories from other cities of India. Stories of collectives, of sharing, caring, of gossip, laughter. It is these stories which make the very urban form of our contemporary Indian cities. The contemporary city is interlinked with these claims, meanings, forms, functions and interpretations. Thus, modern urban landscapes cannot be described through numbers, demographics, income of people, the employment rate, its contribution to the GDP. In this sense, there is more to cities than just its aesthetic, material, construction and planning that the data can analyze or clarify. Moreover, the tidy mechanization cannot deal with these everyday negotiations, nostalgia and ambiguous forms. They produce incredible visions for various transformations, which attempt to generate a new clear urban form which does not follow the logic of these cities. Furthermore, in the bid to generate a clear urban form, there seems to be efforts in removing heterogeneity and real life.

### **Reorienting City-making Through Urban Agency**

As a result, we see modern urban landscapes deeply portray the idea of ambiguity and prompts the question-*whose* city is it anyway? *Who* builds the city? *What* makes the city? In some cases the growing resistance of activists, climate warriors and associations on whatsapp groups is a potent illustration of these questions associated with the making of the contemporary city. One such illustration is the clash between the citizens and the civic body over green lungs of Mumbai- the Aarey forest when the city's civic body granted permission to the Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation Ltd (MMRC) to cut down over 27,000 trees from the Aarey colony in order to build a car-shed for Mumbai metro (Times of India, 2019). Here both sides tried to claim their right over the city.

On one hand the Mumbai's civic body, claimed that the land is *government land* and thus the Government has the right to change the use of public land and on the other the citizens picked up the streets to protest against it and protect the densely green area. These clashes emerged through numerous and simultaneous claims while mediating the contradictions inherent in the issues of legality and obscurity. In a city with a poor protest culture, this event stirred citizens out of their general apathy, compelling them to show up on the ground (Johari, 2019). Besides representing efforts to reconstitute citizenship in the city, these negotiations also reinforce the association between city and democracy. Furthermore, they enable a powerful dialogue beyond *the physical* thus better engaging with the inhabitants of the city. Could this dialogue itself become a rational lens to think

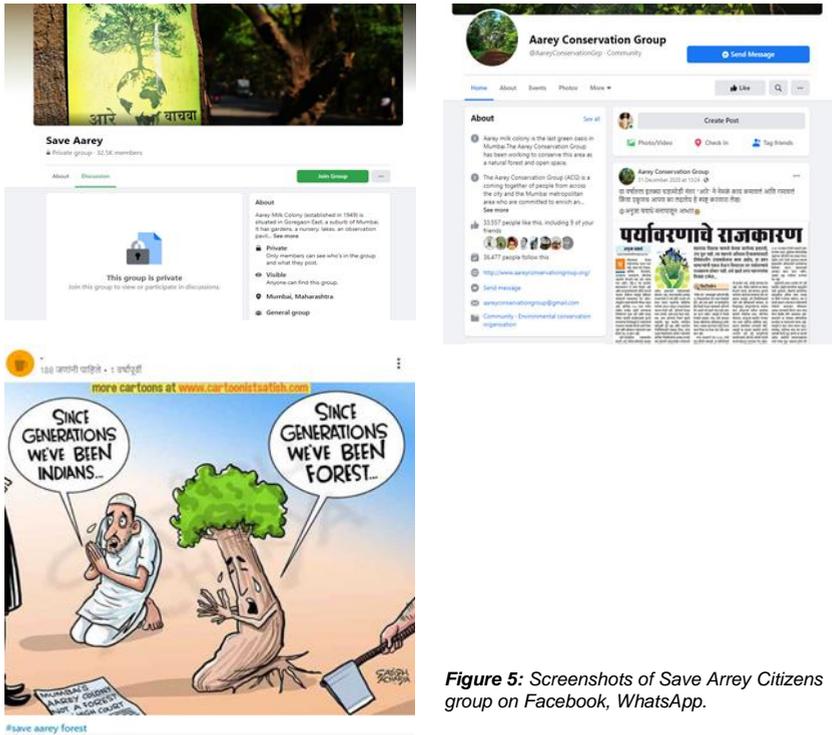


Figure 5: Screenshots of Save Aarey Citizens group on Facebook, WhatsApp.

about the urban Indian landscapes of the 21st century? In this process, the urban landscapes can be envisaged through the dynamics of the city, with the alliance of city and home, city and publics, city and claims, city and community, city and nostalgia where the city reconfigures itself socially, culturally, economically and spatially. This milieu of messy landscapes and ambiguous forms much of the city – where its logic- much of its everyday life unfolds - all at the same time, further muddling the already messy urban forms. ■

**Note:** All photographs courtesy the author unless otherwise attributed.

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