

**KEY WORDS:**

Appropriation, Domesticity, Everydayness, Neighbourhoods, Territory, Temporality

## Interpreting Leftover Data: The Logic of Spatial Appropriation and Everyday Life in Chawls

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay presents a segment of my ongoing PhD research, focusing on the spatial imprints of everyday life in Mumbai's chawls. The broader research aims to explore how residents in these urban neighbourhoods actively appropriate, alter, and negotiate space in their daily lives. Originally constructed to house the city's industrial workforce, chawls have been the subject of numerous studies. However, the research aims to extend the discourse on the spatial production of such neighbourhoods by investigating how seemingly mundane everyday life shapes these environments. This essay explains explicitly the qualitative methods employed during fieldwork to collect data and argues that a mix of experimental methods focused on the leftover everyday life provides a crucial yet underexplored way of understanding the inner workings of similar urban neighbourhoods.



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## Introduction

This essay, drawn from an ongoing PhD research, offers a short overview of methods of understanding and interpreting everyday life as an underlying field of structures and meanings that govern the chawl neighbourhoods. While the broader agenda is to understand the heterogeneous nature of domestic life and spatiality in Mumbai's chawls, this essay makes a case for employing the specificities of the everyday, everydayness, and everyday life in chawls, with a particular focus on the nature of information and data that reveal the logic of spatial production.

Everyday life studies is a discourse emerged in modern literature, eliciting the potential of writing about the mundane and ordinary life<sup>1</sup>. With industrial capitalism still in the discursive atmosphere in the 1950s, this concept helped shape a philosophical foundation for the numerous attempts to theorise the effects of modern systems on practical life at that time<sup>2</sup> (Olson, 2011). While doing the research on everyday life, the breadth of complexity and range of its usage was intriguing, as it links many disciplinary fields and conceptual paradoxes. In fields like cultural studies, feminist literature, human geography, anthropology, etc., the everyday is a crucial theoretical and methodological framework that is argued to effectively address the most overlooked aspects of the measurable human environment. It is used to identify counter-practices to institutional structures, ideologies, grand historical narratives, systems, or top-down frameworks (de Certeau et al., 1998; Felski, 2000; Highmore, 2002; Lefebvre, 2013; Sheringham, 2006). Although the link between everyday life and space was established by Lefebvre (1974) through stages of

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<sup>1</sup> William Galperin traces the concept of "everyday life" from 19th-century literary realism to its influence on 20th-century theorists like Lefebvre and de Certeau. See William Galperin, "Everyday Life," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature, 28 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life emerged in response to the bureaucratization and commodification of daily existence under industrial capitalism. His work, particularly *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947, 1961, 1981), explores alienation while also offering possibilities for resistance and appropriation. See Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1–3, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991–2008).

spatial production, resistance, and appropriation<sup>3</sup>, wider explorations in the spatial field flourished about thirty years later<sup>4</sup>. The *spatial-everyday* approach is still relevant to understanding the relations between systemic phenomena and everyday acts of resistance against unwanted changes.

In this context, Mumbai's chawls emerge as a compelling site for such an inquiry. As a dense, historically working-class housing typology, chawls represent material and spatial forms of negotiation, where conditions such as domesticity, labour, migration, gendered experience, and infrastructural precarity intersect in daily life. Applying the lens of everyday life, as framed by de Certeau, Lefebvre, and Highmore, offers a methodological pathway to decode these intersections as lived expressions of spatial logic, different from the known logic of production of home spaces and neighbourhoods. Highmore's (2002) emphasis on the mundane as politically charged and Lefebvre's notion of space as socially produced are particularly resonant here. In chawls, residents enact informal social contracts, repurpose private and shared spaces, and resist top-down planning rationales that are at work in the urban surroundings, practices that articulate the distinct spatial logic this paper looks into. Thus, it can be argued that to study chawls through the everyday is to theorise from below, but it still contradicts the known condition of what the 'bottom' constitutes. The idea is to grasp how chawl dwellers reinterpreted urban life and generated alternative logics of spatial production over the course of the past century.

Moreover, chawls occupy a critical, though often overlooked, position in the historiography of Indian industrialisation and urbanism. They are simultaneously relics of colonial-era industrial urban planning, typical case of segregatory housing ideologies, and ongoing sites of spatial appropriation within a rapidly neoliberalising city. Their anachronistic presence defies dominant narratives of urbanisation and challenges the global phenomena of deindustrialisation that seek to erase or transform older working-class landscapes into capital-intensive land parcels. Rather than fading into obsolescence, chawls persist as active sites of habitation, memory, and improvisation, revealing a form of urbanism that operates outside the temporal and spatial logics of state and market-driven development. This foregrounds the coexistence of multiple urban temporalities and the resilience of social forms that are often deemed outdated but remain vital to the city's functioning. Investigating the everyday life of chawls, hence, becomes a means to unsettle certain framings of the city and its history by foregrounding practices that are deeply spatial,

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<sup>3</sup> Cieraad, I. (Ed.). (2006). *At home: An anthropology of domestic space*. Syracuse University Press. The term "appropriation" was coined by Daniel Miller in his essay *Appropriating the State on the Council Estate*. Miller contrasts appropriation with Marx's concept of alienation in modern societies, using London's Council Estates (working-class quarters) as an example of how residents subvert alienation by restructuring their living spaces.

<sup>4</sup> See Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), where he acknowledges the contributions of Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, and Georges Perec in shaping the conceptual framework of everyday life.

political, and urban. Chawls reveal how forms of dwelling, kinship, labour, and spatial improvisation emerge not in opposition to the city but as constitutive of it. In this way, the chawl is not simply an object of housing policy or architectural typology, but a generative ground for rethinking how cities are lived, produced, and imagined through alternatives of planning regimes.

### The *Everyday* in Chawls

Chawls (or chaal in Marathi) are typologically defined as gallery-style buildings with flanking rooms along a central corridor or passage (Shetty & Gupte, 2007). These buildings, then known as workers' houses<sup>5</sup>, were historically designed to accommodate the influx of migrants during Bombay's 19th and 20th-century industrial boom, as well as a spatial tool for mill owners to control the working class (Karim, 2019). Over time, however, they have evolved into complex neighbourhoods characterised by overcrowding, socio-economic diversity, and fluid spatial boundaries (Adarkar, 2012). The history of Mumbai's chawls unfolds through a timeline of vulnerabilities, reflecting their evolving roles and resilience. Initially expanding in the 19th century, chawls were conceptually outdated from inception relative to their typological contemporaries in the city<sup>6</sup>. Yet, by the 20th century, they became hubs of collective life, central to labor movements and nationalist resistance in a turbulent economy. Over time, they came to accommodate a complex domesticity shaped by social class, politics, and labour politics (Chandavarkar, 2004). Currently, amid neoliberal urban development, chawls have a hybrid spatial logic, resisting the vulnerabilities of a historically significant neighbourhood (Holwitt, 2020).

A pilot study conducted at the outset revealed that the idea of domesticity and neighbourhood in chawls is best understood as a spatialised everyday process, a layered and evolving set of practices that have sedimented over time. Domesticity, in this context, is not confined to the interiority of the home but spills outward into corridors, thresholds, and communal areas, constantly reshaped by everyday routines, adaptations, and improvisations. Shared kitchens in passageways, temple corners on stair landings, or shrines on frontages demonstrate how domestic life is enacted across space, producing a lived environment that exceeds architectural or regulatory boundaries. Despite the extensive and nuanced work on chawls most notably by Chandavarkar (2004), Adarkar and Menon (2004),

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<sup>5</sup> *The Indian and Pakistan Year Book, Vol. 15* (1828) documents the typology as built for "persons of poor classes" along with lists of chawls documented in Naigaon, Delisle Road, Worli, and Sewri. Other notable mentions include police records, *The Bombay Calendar and Almanac for 1856* (1857), land transaction details in *The Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Failure of the Bank of Bombay* (1869), and in *The Towers of Silence Case [Report of Proceedings in the Trial of Māṅekjī Dārābjī and Others for Rioting]* (1873).

<sup>6</sup> See Karim (2019) on the Board's 1920s proposal for workers' housing, initiated through a design competition under surveyor Arthur E. Miriams. Though never implemented as a large-scale scheme, it influenced the development of the chawl typology and broader debates on working-class housing. Karim attributes this shift to the urgency created by the prevailing austerity discourse.

and Finkelstein (2019) there remains a critical gap in how spatial appropriation and precarity are understood in relation to each other across everyday domestic and neighbourhood scales.

Peter Holwitt's study of chawls, offers a socio-material, ethnographic, and planning-oriented examination of redevelopment processes in chawl neighbourhoods. His analysis highlights how multiple, often conflicting ideologies coexist and collide within the process of chawl redevelopment, making it a contested and negotiated terrain of urban transformation (Holwitt, 2020). Chandavarkar provides a powerful political-historical analysis of how industrial decline and postcolonial state restructuring fragmented working-class solidarities and intensified housing insecurity. His work exposes the caste and community-based tensions embedded in chawl life, challenging the idealised notion of cohesive neighbourhoods (Chandavarkar, 2004). Meanwhile, Finkelstein's ethnography, grounded in affective and sensory registers, brings forth the lived experience of *lively ruination* and the affective labour of survival amid urban neglect (Finkelstein, 2019). Yet, while all these perspectives are crucial in theorising precarity as either structured or affective, they do not fully account for how space itself becomes a medium through which precarity is not only endured but reconfigured. The need to bridge this divide between precarity as a political-economic condition and as an everyday experience calls for a closer reading of spatial appropriation, and how residents repurpose built environments to produce new meanings, rhythms, and forms of resilience.

Existing scholarship tends to either historicise or personalise precarity, often leaving underexplored the material and spatial practices through which uncertainty is negotiated and contested. The existing historiography of Mumbai's chawls, have been narrowly framed as either architectural remnants of industrial housing or as localised urban case studies, and calls instead for their recognition as globally significant sites of post-industrial survival, memory, and working-class endurance (Finkelstein, 2019). This study addresses that omission by focusing explicitly on the spatial logics of adaptation, resistance, and improvisation within chawl life approaching chawls not just as sites of survival, but as spaces of quiet transformation, where appropriation becomes a way of asserting agency, making claims, and reconfiguring life under conditions of sustained instability. Beyond the typological and political readings lies a quieter, continuous process: the remaking of space through repetition, resistance, and adaptation that opposes the underlying condition of precarity and obsolescence. It is within this spatialised everyday that the logic of chawl life can be most meaningfully grasped.

Chawls, thus, can be viewed as sites of altered domesticity, spaces in which normative expectations of the home are reshaped under conditions of precarity, density, and communal life. The domestic sphere here is hybrid, multifunctional, and porous, encompassing a range of uses and meanings that reflect not only need but also agency. These are not simply compromised dwellings, but active and negotiated environments where domesticity is collectively authored. In this sense, chawls exemplify how spatial

vulnerabilities are appropriated and made durable through everyday practice, offering a critical lens into the lived urban experience of working-class neighbourhoods. The essay argues that chawls challenge the traditional notions of spatial logic of a domestic neighbourhood since they regularly mediate segregation, precarity, and estrangement through appropriation reflected in their spatiality. This approach allows for shifting the focus away from the informal identity often assigned to chawls, their comparison to slums in redevelopment policies, and the systemic segregation in housing typologies, instead emphasizing the responses to these conditions.

As an alternative, the chawl neighbourhood can be documented as pluralisms or substitutions that are influenced by every day and non-everyday life. For instance, basic infrastructure becomes social sites, space becomes political, time becomes habitual, history becomes an identity, objects absorb cultural meanings, and movement generates territories. These shifts are possible because of the agency and situatedness facilitated by the homing practices in the backdrop of the history. The inhabitants, a mix of owner-occupants and tenants from various socio-political groups, eventually restructured their territories and temporalities through everyday practices while also challenging the vulnerabilities. These practices defy the capacity of normative methods in understanding and interpreting the logic of spatiality, but with the everyday, everydayness, and everyday life in focus, the nature of spatial production through appropriations and negotiations can be measured.

## Methodology

The study adopts a multi-method qualitative approach, combining architectural mapping, field observation, interviews, and visual ethnography to document and analyse everyday spatial practices.

Data collection is conducted at two spatial scales:

- (1) the larger neighbourhood context, focusing on three chawl clusters in Girangaon - Old BDD Chawl, Kohinoor Chawl, and Police Colony - and,
- (2) the domestic scale, which focuses on individual home spaces within the chawl, including corridors, galleries, common areas, streets, and other public spaces (excluding private rooms).

These different spatial scales allow for a comprehensive understanding of the broader neighborhood context and the more intimate domestic practices of the residents. Corridors, courtyards, temples, cottage industries, and patios - some of the distinctive features of chawls mark the internal areas of chawl buildings. These spaces are often considered private in a conventional sense but function differently due to the lack of clear boundaries. This is also a reflection of overlapping forms of spatial appropriation practices across

various spatial scales in chawls. These boundaries tend to be in a flux, both spatially and temporally, and explain larger socio-cultural identities of the occupants. For example, footpaths and passageways, typically viewed as public spaces, are often repurposed as home frontages for extended domestic activities or shop fronts. While close to the domestic interior, these spaces are a collection of heterogeneous territories where the boundaries between private and public are blurred. At the neighbourhood scale, streets and street corners host common facilities such as local union offices, social gathering spaces, and other public activities. These public spaces also serve as sites for social rituals and cultural expressions. They are crucial for understanding the social life of the chawl, which is shaped by proximity, informality, and a sense of shared ownership over the spaces.

## Spatial Analysis and Mapping

Mapping is argued as a tool of engagement and a critical method of inquiry that captures the spatial and relational complexities of chawl life. The intricate and often improvised spatial arrangements within chawls formed through acts of sharing, negotiation, encroachment, and adaptation resist conventional documentation through text or typology (linear or homogenous conclusions). In this context, mapping becomes a way to trace the everyday life of space. For example, a corridor doubling as a kitchen, a window ledge becoming a platform for small-scale retail, or a shared toilet entrance converted into a semi-private washing space are not just informal adaptations; they are spatial practices that challenge the fixity of architectural categories. These appropriations are neither accidental nor chaotic, but follow patterns of cohabitation, community logic, and intergenerational knowledge that deserve spatial analysis. Drawing from traditions of critical cartography and Lefebvre's spatial theory, mapping is approached here as both a knowledge practice and a political act, one that challenges dominant narratives about chawls by visualising counter-geographies grounded in lived experience. Moreover, as chawls are often misclassified within state frameworks as slums or transitional typologies, mapping offers a means to disrupt these reductive categories and recover the nuanced, historically embedded, and socially produced nature of chawl space. By foregrounding process over fixity, mapping reveals how everyday spatial practices become strategies of endurance and resistance under conditions of precarity. Through mapping, the chawl is re-read not as a decaying typology, but as a space of continuous invention, a site where domesticity is negotiated collectively and in motion.

The essay focuses on a range of mapping techniques to capture these complex and heterogeneous spatial practices (**Table 1**). Drawing on Guy Debord's concept of the *dérive*, modified Drift maps will document smaller, subjective, and shifting territories<sup>7</sup>. Rhizomatic

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<sup>7</sup> Guy Debord's concept of the *dérive* is a foundational idea from the field of psychogeography, developed in the 1950s by Debord and the Situationist International. The term *dérive* translates roughly as "drift" in English, and it describes an unstructured, unplanned journey through an urban environment, guided not by a map or destination, but by the emotions, atmospheres, and spontaneous attractions of the surroundings.

maps, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of rhizomes, will illustrate the interconnectedness of elements and interrelations within the chawl, enabling the identification of patterns, flows, and temporal shifts in territorial use<sup>8</sup>. In addition to mapping, long-exposure photographs, videos, and photomontages will be used to capture the visual registers of spatial appropriation, particularly the temporal changes that occur during different times of the day or communal festivities<sup>9</sup>. These visual methods will offer a more comprehensive understanding of the chawl as a dynamic and living space.

The measurable conditions of appropriation can be understood through three key aspects: territory, people, and temporality. Territory facilitates and gives purpose to appropriation, shaping spatial use and adaptation. It can be analyzed using mapping techniques such as transect maps, drift maps, and rhizomatic maps, which reveal patterns of occupation and transformation. People, both individually and collectively, play an active role in asserting appropriation, negotiating and reshaping their environments to suit their needs. Their interactions with space highlight the social dimensions of spatial production. Temporality reflects the shifting roles and boundaries of space over time, capturing how appropriation evolves. This is visually represented through photomontages and overlays, illustrating the dynamic and layered nature of spatial practices.

Method	Conditions to capture
Drift Maps (modified <i>dérive</i> )	Inspired by Debord; trace subjective, fluid movement and emotional geographies of residents across shared spaces.
Rhizomatic Maps	Based on Deleuze & Guattari; map interconnections, flows, and spatial overlaps across units and uses.
Transect Mapping	Tracks spatial change along a linear route (e.g. corridor to unit); highlights micro-transitions and thresholds.
Fragment Mapping	Focuses on isolated spatial elements (e.g. window, toilet block); reveals micro-negotiations and adaptations.
Plan-based Annotation	Layering of formal floor plans with informal uses and alterations made by residents.
Photomontages	Visually layer spatial transformations across time; effective for showing adaptations during events or seasons.
Long-exposure photographs	Captures atmospheric, low-motion spatial dynamics (e.g. lighting, movement, usage patterns over time).
Counter-mapping	Challenges official representations and classification of chawls; reveals lived geographies ignored by the state.

**Table 1: Methods chart with details of data collection**

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome presents a non-hierarchical way of understanding systems and connections. Unlike a tree, which grows from a single root and branches in a fixed order, a rhizome spreads sideways in many directions. It connects different elements without following a set path, beginning, or end. Any part can link to any other, making it a flexible model that resists rigid categories, linear thinking, and binary oppositions.

<sup>9</sup> This essay draws inspiration from Sarah Pink’s approach to visual methods, particularly her emphasis on using images and video not merely as representations, but as collaborative and sensory tools for understanding how people experience and make meaning in everyday spaces.

This multi-modal mapping framework offers a way to engage with chawls not as static architectural remnants, but as dynamic, lived, and continuously negotiated environments. By combining spatial, visual, and temporal tools, these methods illuminate the layered practices of appropriation, the rhythms of everyday life, and the fluid boundaries of domesticity. Crucially, they allow for the chawl's spatial logic to emerge from within, through the perspectives, movements, and adaptations of its resident, rather than being imposed by external typologies or planning frameworks.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the continuous negotiation and adaptation of space within the chawl highlight the intricate relationship between physical structures and the social, economic, and cultural forces that shape urban life. Far from being passive occupants of a static built environment, residents actively engage with their surroundings, modifying and appropriating shared spaces to meet evolving needs. These collective spaces, corridors, courtyards, stairwells, and other communal areas—serve as more than mere passageways or residual zones; they become dynamic arenas of interaction, negotiation, and adaptation. Whether through informal trade, social gatherings, or everyday domestic activities, these spaces foster a sense of community and resilience, enabling residents to navigate the challenges of dense urban living. This perspective challenges conventional definitions of valuable and functional urban space by shifting attention to these often-overlooked *leftover* spaces; areas typically dismissed in mainstream urban planning. However, the fluid and adaptive nature of these spaces reveals a more nuanced reality, one in which residents exercise agency, creatively shaping their surroundings in response to economic constraints, infrastructural limitations, and shifting socio-political landscapes.

Recognizing the significance of these everyday spatial practices calls for a reevaluation of how urban environments are understood and designed. Instead of viewing complexity or informality as an unmappable entity, it should be represented as having essential components of urban. The ways in which people continuously reshape and reclaim their environments underscore the importance of embracing a more inclusive and flexible approach to urbanism, one that values lived experience as much as physical form.

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