

Dharavi's Public Space: The Construction Site

MARTHA KOLOKOTRONI

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Abstract: The view of Dharavi as a dreadful slum in Mumbai has been a challenge for government planners, who were charged with designing for other people's lives without any knowledge of their necessities and their quality of living. The process of designing housing under this model involved construction, which set as a testing point, Dharavi's public space. Such construction had clear starting and ending points. However, the true nature of Dharavi's construction on its public space goes far beyond these practices: The construction site is itself the end result; the stage upon which the slum was gradually transforming its purpose and form, driven by foreigners, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and its residents.

The present paper explores Dharavi's public space as a construction site from both the perspective of government officials, and from the perspective of a particular NGO in Mumbai, the team of 'URBZ'. As the government views it, this site embodies the slum-free vision that satisfies a desire for change: a vision that is encapsulated within the concrete walls of one more building. On the other hand, the slightest familiarity of the team of URBZ with Dharavi's streets and alleys, its residents, and their activities gives an entirely different picture, in which the public space emerges as a huge construction site of hopes and possibilities. Construction, in this sense, is a work in progress originating not only from residents, but also from NGOs. The key question here is how this work could serve as a means of successfully bringing about positive change in a variety of domains. The conclusions of this paper, thus, confirm the significant role of the local NGOs in representing powerful mechanisms for motivating residential participation in positive change and thus, the key contribution lies in uncovering the creative and innovative possibilities grounded in various experiences on the public space of a slum.

Keywords: Dharavi; slum; construction site; participation; NGO

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE VISION OF A SLUM-FREE DHARAVI

At issue in this paper is the construction work on public space in one particular urban setting: Mumbai's Dharavi. Dharavi has the reputation for being one of Asia's largest slums and the largest slum in India, with more than 700,000 people crammed into an area of 1.75 sq.km., which leaves very few public spaces that are still unexploited (Fig. 1, 2 & 3).

Attracted by its strategic location (Fig. 4), in the geographical centre of Mumbai (an industrial city of almost 19 million people), migrants from all over India have moved to this swampy area, which in 1976 was officially recognized as a slum.¹ Today, Dharavi is conveniently situated in between three major railway stations, Matunga and Mahim on the Western Railway line, and Sion on the Central Railway line. Moreover, it is located at the intersection of Sion and Mahim Link Roads, which serve the east-west and north-south connections in the city, and its distance to Mumbai's International Airport is approximately 20 minutes (Sharma, 2000). Two main arteries cut

¹ Even though there is not an agreed definition of what a slum is, it is usually generalized as an informal area of appalling poverty. On January 4, 1976, the local government undertook the first official enumeration of slum dwellers in Bombay. The survey was a head-counting procedure that lasted one single day and had the help of 7000 personnel. As a ladder for the city and the shanty settlements, the census indicated different types of occupied land and identified that there were 2.8 million slum dwellers living in 1671 settlements. The overall slum population was 40% of the city's total population, and 83% of this population were located in the suburbs. In the case of Dharavi, the survey revealed the density of the settlements occupying the area to be 300 in just one acre. The recognized slum dwellers were given identification cards to assure an alternative location if they should have to move. See, S.S. Jha, (1986) *Structure of Urban Poverty: The Case of Bombay Slums*. Bombay: Bombay Popular Prakashan, 9; Vandana Desai, (1995) *Community Participation and Slum Housing: A Study of Bombay*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 138-139; and Kalpana Sharma, (2000) *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum*. India: Penguin Books, 164.



Figure 1 (Opp. Left): View of Dharavi from the top of a residential structure shows the high density of the population and the lack of physical space in several areas. In the background, the Vaibhav building, built on land vacated by the Western India Tanneries, when almost all tanneries were moved out of Dharavi in the 1970s. (Source: Photo by the Author, *View of Dharavi*, September 2013).

Figure 2 (Top): Dharavi today is an area of substandard housing that does not meet building codes and in some parts has inadequate amenities, such as electricity and water supply. The recycling industry, *The 13th Compound* district in Dharavi, as seen in the image, employs over 10,000 people and is considered one of the largest in India. It is located at the edge of the settlement on Mahim Creek, where the Mahim-Sion Link Road intersects with the 60-Foot Road, and the land belongs to the Bombay Municipal Corporation. (Source: Photo by the Author, *The 13th Compound*, 2013).

Figure 3 (Bottom Above): Dharavi has developed without following any planning, and as the architect and urban designer Rahul Mehrotra has described it, the enclave's spatial structures epitomize the "kinetic city," the city in motion and "in constant flux," constructed using short-term materials. Source: Rahul Mehrotra, "Learning from Mumbai" (paper presented at the Restoration & Renewal Symposium, October 2003) (Image Source: Photo by the Author, *Inside Dharavi*, 2013)

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Figure 4: Map of Mumbai in 2013 and Dharavi's strategic location at the geographical centre of the city with its major infrastructure and four representative densities that address the richness of the city's urban textiles



Figure 5: Top: Representation of Dharavi's density and photos by author, *Dharavi's neighbourhoods*, September 2013, digital file type. Bottom: The Bandra Kurla Complex is one of the newest commercial and business centres in Mumbai, due to its proximity to Dharavi, many developers and governmental representatives saw the slum as the extension of Bandra Kurla in the South. Bandra Kurla Complex density diagram and photos by author, *Bandra Kurla Complex*, September 2013, digital file type

through the area: the 60 Feet Road and the 90 Feet Road. One of Dharavi's closest neighbours is the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC), Mumbai's financial and commercial district, established in the 1970s to serve as a magnet for business activities in South Mumbai (Fig. 5). It attracts high-income residents on a daily basis and is considered a model for future developments in the city.²

Heralding the dawn of a new global era in 2000, the State Government of Maharashtra (GoM) and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) set the goal of converting Mumbai into a world-class city. Steeped in neo-liberal ideology (which informed its policies worldwide), and inspired by Shanghai and Singapore as examples of world-class cities, Mumbai's government aimed at reducing the city's slums from 50-60% in 2003 to 10-20% by 2013 (Bombay First and McKinsey, 2003).

The first slum to feel the impact of this vision was Dharavi, primarily because of its size and location. In 2004, the government launched a planning program to transform Dharavi into a beautiful town by 2013. The program, the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP), was the state's first effort to involve private developers in the construction of public housing. Its aim was the resettlement of Dharavi's population into high-rise, mixed-use buildings. Whereas the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics" (2001) argues that the world seems marked by an international *victory of neoliberalism*, the activist Sheela Patel claims in her essay "Dharavi is in the Midst of a storm" (2000) that this development project goes to *the heart of the crisis of modern development practice*. This modern practice, which attempts to be globally competitive, fully depends upon the technical expertise and the mechanisms of the private sector. With the above considerations, Dharavi is identified as the testing site for applying the vocabulary of comprehensive planning and for experimenting with various possibilities of construction.

After a nine-year delay, construction on the first experimental building of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project (DRP) began in February 2013 at the north-east boundary of Dharavi. It was scheduled for completion in the beginning of 2014 (Fig. 6). As governmental officials mentioned, the key reason behind this choice was that the land where the building would be located was a vacant public space.³ The project's first building illustrates this basic approach of applying the vocabulary of comprehensive planning while experimenting

2 The Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) is a commercial hub in the centre of Mumbai. It shares a border with Dharavi and is one of the first "growth centres" that served as models for future redevelopment. After its completion, all eyes turned to Dharavi as an extension of the BKC.

3 As a sub-engineer for the DRP/SRA mentioned, there were two reasons behind the choice of this plot: 1) The land belongs to the state agency, Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), and 2) It was a vacant space.

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Figure 6: Construction of the first experimental building in Dharavi began in February 2013 and was scheduled for completion before the elections in 2014. However, until today the building is still unfinished. (Photo by the Author, *Construction Works (DRP) in Dharavi*, September 2013).

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. In September 2013, thrilled by the latest updates on the dream project, government officials were spreading the news about the construction site in Dharavi and encouraging people to visit it. But, those who do so are likely to be struck by the political blindness evident in these initial governmental efforts: the one unfinished building involved in the construction so far is woefully lacking in any trace of essential resource.

There are two ways to see Dharavi's public space as a construction site: from the perspective of government officials, or from the perspective of anyone else. As the government views it, this site embodies the slum-free vision that

satisfies a desire for change: a vision that is encapsulated within the concrete walls of the single unfinished building. However, if you are not a government official involved in the project, the slightest familiarity with Dharavi's streets and alleys, its residents, and their activities gives an entirely different picture, in which the public space emerges as a huge construction site of hopes and possibilities. Construction in this sense is ubiquitous throughout Dharavi and involves people, events, and the media from both inside and outside of the enclave. This is the construction of gradual change, with no clear beginning or end, which comprises multiple levels that are not limited to the erection of buildings. In a broad sense, it also entails the building of social and spatial change that is taking place on public space: the works (or operations) behind constructing knowledge, a global identity, and an economy. In the case of the DRP, all these works concentrate on the non-governmental methods that are associated with issues and problems related to proposed projects for Dharavi's future. The dialectic between these issues and problems has also been translated as the *composed practice of resistance* in Dharavi, which emerged at the area's public realm.

2. THE PUBLIC SPACE IN DHARAVI: A TERRAIN OF RESISTANCE

Resistance is certainly a word that sparks anxiety among Indian authorities involved in the transformation of Dharavi. The reason for this rests in the fact that since 2004, the year the DRP was introduced, Dharavi's public space has been converted into what the geographer Paul Routledge (1993) has termed a "terrain of resistance," in which conflicts and contestations among various objectives, aims and agendas remain sheltered under the weight of governmental and non-governmental activities.⁴ As a concept, the "terrain of resistance" contains a critical component that is closely related to the political struggle of territorial encounters (Routledge, 1993). In the case of the DRP, the concept of resistance has evolved into an uncomfortably complex challenge that reflects conflicts of interests and involves several concepts that were incorporated into the DRP's objectives. Included among these are: notions of participation (participatory planning), the emergence of NGOs, and the relationship between NGOs and official authorities.

⁴ Routledge writes: "A terrain of resistance refers to those places where struggle is actively articulated by the oppressed, rather than being a metaphor defining for the oppressed where and how struggle should take place. More specifically, a terrain of resistance comprises an interwoven web of historical, political, cultural, economic, ecological, geographical, social and psychological conditions and relationships – a site of contestation among differing beliefs, values and goals that are place-specific: See, Paul Routledge, (1993) *Terrains of Resistance: Nonviolent Social Movements and the Contestation of Place in India*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 35-36

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Participatory planning is a vital process and one that has dominated various narratives in India for over a decade. As the planner Vandana Desai (1995) claims in the case of Mumbai, the 1980s may be termed the decade of participation. But how exactly is the term defined? In Desai's words, "participation assumes an activity in which the community takes part and the involvement of at least one other party, usually a government agency or a NGO" (Desai, 1995). In order to be effective, the process of engaging stakeholders requires the active contribution and involvement of people (participants) in the decision-making process at several levels of society. In his exploration of various levels of participation in the Third World, James Midgley (1986) claims that the effectiveness of this process depends on who has "ultimate control" over decisions, and argues that only local communities should decide their own affairs. This is also at the centre of John Turner's argument in his work *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (1976), in which he begins his analysis with the central issue of "Who Decides?" for housing issues in low-income areas.⁵

Participation as a concept, thus, implicates communities in planning procedures. In the case of Dharavi, which is divided into more than eighty neighborhoods, each community is deeply associated with the notion of location and sometimes religion. In the past decade the concept of community participation has occupied discussions about slums, and as James Midgley (1986) argues, this usually has negative connotations that convey the notion of disadvantage. It is a confusing term under which all kind of activities, principally related to housing, tend to congregate. In the case of Dharavi, however, the idea of community participation has evolved into a tool for resisting governmental strategies that usually attempt to exclude dwellers from the decision-making process. It is termed by UN HABITAT (1983), "a right, a form of grassroots democracy." Since the people affected have a better idea of what they need, they can have an impact on their daily lives only through participatory activities, with or without government involvement.

In many cases, representatives of NGOs are the essential actors in community participation. Unlike the government, NGOs are "dynamic, flexible and socially concerned" (Midgley, 1986). Their role is to mediate between the government and vulnerable populations, to understand the latter's needs and to represent them in different groups in order to ensure desirable results.

⁵ In particular he writes: "The issue of who decides and who does what for whom, is a question of how we house ourselves, how we learn, how we keep healthy. This discussion can only take place between those who can separate the ways and means from the ends, and who are therefore able to question the commercialized or institutionalized values of modern societies." See: John F.C., Turner, (1976, repr. 2009) *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009, 12-13

Even though NGOs have proved to operate effectively in most slums, the usual problems, such as limited resources, corruption, and bureaucracy have been a hurdle, a restriction on their fruitful delivery of services. Thanks to his personal experience with NGOs in India, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2000) has come to believe that these organisations usually have complex relations not only with the government, but also with the public sphere and local communities. Their structure can also be “uncomfortably complicit” and might threaten the politics of partnership (Appadurai, 2000).

This paper elaborates on the concept of the community participation and their collaboration with local NGOs, through the case of one NGO in Mumbai, the team of URBZ. In examining the strategies of constructing cultural identity on public space and in studying alternative modes of resistance, URBZ has contributed in the spatial transformation of what is usually known as “Asia’s largest slum.”⁶ The stories examined here serve as an antilogous to those who mistakenly suppose that the strength of Dharavi’s construction works lay hidden beneath the current fashion of redevelopment. Providing the context in which social movements, political structures, creative activities and research intersect, this paper explores the relations of power, domination and resistance that take place on public space. It demonstrates an alternative approach that uses local resources and depends on the willingness of people to invest their energy to improve Dharavi’s public realm.

3. PARTICIPATORY PLANNING: THE TEAM OF URBZ

URBZ is a Dharavi-based interactive research platform, which provides alternative methodologies for creative urban development to those offered by the state, and facilitates the production of knowledge, information, and practices to build resilience in cities. It was co-founded in 2008 by three individuals: Geeta Mehta, a professor of architecture and urban design, Matias Echanove, a planner, and Rahul Srivastava, an anthropologist.⁷ For the three of

6 This is how Dharavi was promoted in English-written Indian newspapers. See: “Dharavi... the dreams becomes a reality,” advertisement in *The Times of India*, January, 24, 2004

7 Matias Echanove, who had already collaborated with Geeta Mehta on developmental issues at the University of Tokyo, first came to Mumbai in 2007 to intern at a local NGO, SPARC. At the time, SPARC was involved in Dharavi’s census. As soon as Echanove arrived, he became part of SPARC’s enumeration team, in which he approached people and asked them to show him the boundaries of their communities in Dharavi. In this first trip to Mumbai, Echanove met Srivastava, then the Director of PUKAR, an independent research centre in India founded by the historian Carol Breckenridge and the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. Once he completed his internship at SPARC, he collaborated with Srivastava in PUKAR. Both of them, at the time, were engaged in several discussions and elaborating on several ideas related to the impact of urbanization in cities and the growth of the informal sector. One of these ideas was the formation of URBZ, a concept that was already under discussion between Mehta and Echanove

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them, Dharavi, in its present-day shape, had so much potential that everyone could learn something different from the experience:

*“We always felt that Dharavi is a living laboratory of urban practices that we should learn rather than ‘redevelop’.”*⁸

As a counterpoint to other local NGOs, which supported the participation of Dharavi’s residents in the government’s redevelopment process, the URBZ team was strongly opposed to the nature of the redevelopment per se. To paraphrase Echanove and Srivastava’s words in their paper “The Village Inside” (2010), the production of local knowledge, the encapsulation of visions, the decision-making and the planning of communities can only be possible with the involvement of “motivated local residents”. Central to URBZ’s approach was the question of how to motivate local residents by breaking down the old barriers of activism that had focused on mass mobilizations and demonstrations that took over the public space in the settlement. Evaluating the already existent layers of contestation in Dharavi, URBZ shaped its practice of resistance around creativity, flexibility, interaction between residents, and a variety of techniques that expressed its aspirations in the use of public space. Through their collaborative platform in URBZ, the three members gradually developed a series of tools for contradicting the traditional planning apparatuses such as “the heavy CAD maps and the GIS surveys” and concentrated mainly on participatory resourceful workshops.⁹ They also examined the two principal concepts in Dharavi’s reality -- the predominant “tool-house” and the “organic city,” which they called “user-generated city” -- and set them in the context of architectural theory by introducing Dharavi in academic discussions.¹⁰

In the case of Mumbai, the model of the “tool-house” arose after the closure of mills, when many workers who had lost their jobs started running businesses in the place in which they were living. The collection of several tool-houses in one area is what the team of URBZ terms as a “user-generated city.” Such a city is generated incrementally, without following any specific design or master plan. The “user-generated city” is an evolution of the concept of the organic city, which is usually understood as being an informal or unplanned urban area that has emerged spontaneously as a result of people’s need for housing. The organic city is “often culturally dynamic and creative”

8 Matias Echanove, (2009) URBZ Office in Dharavi, Mumbai. In *URBZ net*, <http://urbz.net/urbz-office-in-dharavi-mumbai> [Accessed October 23, 2013]

9 Rahul Srivastava and Matias Echanove, (2009) Dharavi: User-Generated City. In *airroots*, <http://www.airroots.org/2009/01/dharavi-user-generated-city/> [Accessed October 23, 2013].

10 The “tool-house” is a multifunctional building that can serve both residential and economic purposes. Its flexible structural arrangements, which grant the inhabitant an opportunity to live and work in the same place, facilitate the economic spirit and productivity of the area in various creative ways



Figure 7: The team of URBZ argues that Dharavi is a combination of several tool-houses and has evolved into a typical organic city. The photo shows a typical commercial street inside Dharavi and uncovers the concept of such an organic city. (Photo by the Author, *Commercial Street*, January 2009)



Figure 8: Residential street inside Dharavi- a combination of tool-houses. (Photo by the Author, *Residential Street*, January 2009)

and has all the potentials of becoming an inextricable part of modern cities (Echanove and Srivastava).

In URBZ's approach, Dharavi is a combination of several tool-houses and has evolved into a typical organic city, rather than into what is usually referred to as a dirty slum. The importance of the tool-house and the organic city model is based on the fact that both were generated in an age of information through a local population's need to live and work in an urban area, and the replacement of this complex "labyrinth" of pedestrian streets "packed with small vendors" that predominate in an organic city, with high-rise homogeneous apartments is "not as much an urban makeover as an economic takeover" (Echanove and Srivastava, 2010) (Fig. 7 & 8). The enforcement of well-designed development driven by real estate interests, which ignores the local factor, and the replacement of such incrementally developed environments jeopardize the social, cultural and economic character of these neighborhoods.

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Moving away from existing methods of resistance from other NGOs, URBZ inaugurated its activities and practices of resistance by exposing the potential of local resources and the public space. Thus, instead of looking for means through which to collaborate with the government in Dharavi's redevelopment process, the URBZ team motivated dwellers to participate in creative workshops that demonstrated that Dharavi had already been redeveloped by its inhabitants. The team therefore focused on examining residents' hopes for the area's future and attempted to find ways to implement their visions on the actual space. The major tools in this process were design and research. In fleshing out its arguments, the URBZ team contributed to Dharavi's communities with a cluster of events, such as the participatory workshop, *Urban Typhoon*, in Koliwada during March 2008, and the online platform www.dharavi.org.

4. THE 'URBAN TYPHOON' WORKSHOP

In March 2008, Geeta Mehta, Echanove and Srivastava organised the *Urban Typhoon* workshop in Koliwada, Dharavi. The workshop was built around the context of local participation, art, and social activities.¹¹ At stake here is the manner in which the word *participation* is perceived. Here it is being understood not as public marches or enumeration activities, but rather as a vehicle "to allow more connections and interdependencies" between residents and individual researchers and activists.¹² The workshop was held in Koliwada between March 16th and 22nd, 2008, and drew attention to the formation of alternative visions for the area's future that would run parallel to the evolution of the DRP.

Koliwada, which translates to fishing village, is one of the oldest settlements on the seven islands of Mumbai. Its location on the edge of Mahim Creek long facilitated the fishing activities of its residents, but over the years and with the construction of the Sion-Bandra Link Road, the area was filled with waste from surrounding sites, which made fishing nearly unfeasible.¹³ The history of the area has witnessed several attempts by the government to redevelop and change its unique character. One such example was the latest Dharavi Redevelopment Project, which involved the transformation of Koliwada into a high-rise residential hub. In 2007, after many years of resistance, Kolis, the

11 Matias Echanove, interview by the author, Mumbai, September 20, 2013.

12 This was the key objective of the *Urban Typhoon Workshop in Koliwada-Dharavi*, Mumbai, 2008.

13 Although fishing activities have been significantly reduced, Koliwada still holds its title of a fishing colony to this day, thanks to its daily bustling fish markets. See: Katja Savchuk, (2008) A snapshot of Koliwada. In *Urban Typhoon Workshop, Koliwada-Dharavi*, report prepared by Urbanology. Mumbai, 27.

residents of the area, were finally granted exemption from the DRP due to Koliwada's long history and its unique character as one of the oldest fishing villages. One must note, however, that the Kolis were not opposed to the transformation per se but only to the government's involvement in the change and its control over their life. Therefore, since 2008 they have been engaged in the process of forming housing societies in preparation for self-development. It was in this spirit that the residents invited several individuals to participate in the *Urban Typhoon* workshop and brainstorm about the area's future.¹⁴

Over 130 people from all over the world voluntarily joined the workshop. Members of the organizing team included community leaders, social workers, and residents of Koliwada, individual architects and activists, and the three-member team of URBZ. The participants were divided into twelve groups and placed under the guidance of several professionals with backgrounds in architecture, political economy, anthropology, urban planning, music, social science and the media. These workshops, which aimed to transform Koliwada from a redevelopment testing area to a creative hub, also attracted the interest of other local NGOs. For example Sheela Patel of SPARC and Jockim Arputham of NSDF participated in the event as guest speakers.

The final product of the workshop's week was a rich variety of alternative proposals for the future of Koliwada as well as imaginative solutions translated into several formats – plans, pictures, collages, music, and guidelines – that enhanced innovative strategies and mobilized broad communities to engage in creative practices of resistance to the top-down transformation of Dharavi. The end of the workshop thematised the visions of residents regarding the future of their neighbourhood and successfully implanted these aspirations into their social life. Moreover, the productive week demonstrated that the residents could be successfully involved in the development process if a relationship between redevelopment and creativity was nurtured. As soon as the workshop was over, Mehta, Echanove and Srivastava attempted to combine all of the alternative proposals, upload them online and leave them open to review by the public. One of their first ideas was to display the results of the workshop in the media. The residents, however, were not sure about representing their work in newspapers and thus the team of URBZ came up with the idea to create a

¹⁴ As Geeta Mehta wrote: "The purpose of the workshops is to brainstorm solutions to local issues, and trigger creative thinking ... These workshops are designed to bridge the gap between theory and reality and between experts and local communities. Participation by people with deep knowledge of the ground reality and daily life of a community is considered necessary to produce effective and functional concepts. This local knowledge is rooted in the community's experience and can manifest itself through events such as the Urban Typhoon workshops." See: Geeta Mehta, (2008) *Harvesting Creativity at the Bottom of the Pyramid*. In *Urban Typhoon Workshop, Koliwada-Dharavi*, report prepared by Urbanology. Mumbai, 15-16.

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new website, www.dharavi.org, which would serve as a link between local residents and people interested in activities related to Dharavi. The webpage began operating in March 2008.

The www.dharavi.org soon grew beyond the coverage of the workshop and became an online platform that allowed anyone who had an interest in, or an alternative idea for, the development of Dharavi to publish it in any language. Architects, filmmakers, journalists, urban planners and community members connected through this online platform, which used open source tools such as Google Earth and Flickr, to expose discussions on the area's future. Dharavi became a site for online examination in which data was generated and published by its users. The webpage set the basis for a tentative formulation of Dharavi's various stories, but due to financial constraints, did not last for more than two years. In 2010, the webpage stopped its operations and all the information collected during this period was transferred to URBZ's main page.

Meanwhile, in consideration of the fact that Dharavi – thanks to its complex layers and the constant change in its fabric – was the subject of URBZ's research, the team set up an office within its boundaries, in the New Transit Camp, in August 2009 (Fig. 9).¹⁵ In late summer of 2009, the office started operating in Dharavi by facilitating the production and exchange of knowledge and ideas for a better urban environment. From the outset, URBZ's office also housed the Dharavi School of Urbanology, which wished to invite researchers from all over the world to examine Dharavi's unique characteristics and compare their knowledge to others' experiences.

Since 2009, the URBZ team has been involved in various activities in Dharavi. It has organized seminars, art events, and participatory workshops that function inside and outside India. Through this sequence of occasions, URBZ has attempted to promote Dharavi's public space as an organic city that is constantly changing and evolving through local initiatives. Residents have had an opportunity to express their aspirations for the future of Dharavi in pictures, plans and through various collaborations with individual researchers who have visited the area, by exploring the immense possibilities of the area's public space. They have resisted the forces that sustain the belief that Dharavi is just one more slum in Asia, and have exposed the talents and interests of the inhabitants and the fact that redevelopment is a process that has been taking place in Dharavi for over a decade.¹⁶

¹⁵ Initially the team tried to rent a space in Koliwada but as the rents there were very high, they looked into other potential neighborhoods in Dharavi. Source: Matias Echanove, interview by author, Mumbai, September 20, 2013

¹⁶ In an article written by Echanove and Srivastava on the meaning of the term "slum" in *The New York Times* on February 21, 2009, a lawyer and longtime resident of Dharavi raised issues that do need to be considered in the redevelopment of Dharavi, and pointed out that:



Figure 9: From the very first day, the URBZ's office in Dharavi provided consultation services related to architecture and planning and also acted as a meeting space for motivated researchers from around the world who could work and learn from the area. (Photo by the Author, *URBZ Office in Dharavi*, September 2013).

URBZ contributed to construction works in Dharavi by exploring mechanisms of creativity that made it easier for residents to build and uphold their cultural identity. Such mechanisms produced new geographies of resistance that crossed the borders of traditional activism. URBZ activities contributed to the erasure of Dharavi's negative image as Asia's largest slum and represented the area differently around the globe.

"We have always improved Dharavi by ourselves. All we want is permission and support to keep doing it. Is that asking for too much?" said Ramesh Misra. See: Ramesh Misra in Matias Echanove and Rahul Srivastava, "Taking the Slum out of Slumdog," in *The New York Times*, February 21, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/21/opinion/21srivastava.html?_r=0 [Accessed October 23, 2013]

5. CONCLUSION: THE CONSTRUCTION SITE

In *Housing by People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments*, John Turner (1976) suggests that people's activities in low-income settlements should be seen as the solution rather than the problem of urbanization. In the first section of his book, Turner describes his visit to the *urbanizaciones populares* settlement in Arequipa Peru with Pedro Beltran, a political figure appointed Minister of Finance and Prime Minister of Peru between 1959 and 1961. In the *urbanizaciones populares* nearly every building was made of concrete or brick and the public space was covered by resourceful activities (Turner 1976). Instead of seeing the possibilities of such a place as a construction site, Beltran saw "a vast shanty town" and soon decided to clear it.

The view of the *urbanizaciones populares* as a "dreadful slum" has been a challenge for architects and planners, who during the 1960s were charged with designing these settlements without any knowledge of their necessities and their quality of living. Beltran viewed the public space in *urbanizaciones populares* as a "construction site" for a future settlement, a stage upon which a transformation could take place in which the slum would become something other than a slum, driven by architects and planners. For Turner, however, the "construction site" clearly goes far beyond the buildings alone. Beltran's position is the top-down approach to planning, while Turner represents the bottom-up approach.

The top-down approach in slum redevelopment programmes involves the participation of architects, planners, policy-makers, and administrators. Top-down projects typically begin with design proposals and housing policies, in which drawings have a principal role. As Turner (1976) argued, the major goal of this approach is to minimize cost and maximize productivity, with the result that procedures and products are standardized and large-scale (the result is a series of massive, low-income housing schemes). However, the problem with such "products" is not the economic cost, but rather the social one. These centralized decision-making systems that generate large housing schemes to replace slums and appear to be beneficial for its residents are actually "instruments of oppression widening the gap between the poor and the rich" (Turner, 1976). On the other hand the bottom-up approach in slum upgrading programmes mainly involves the participation of residents. This is what Turner (1976) characterizes as a "locally self-governing autonomous system."¹⁷

¹⁷ As Turner suggests, this system contains personal and local resources, such as: "... imagination, initiative, commitment and responsibility, skill and muscle-power; the capability for using specific and often irregular areas of land or locally available materials and tools; the ability to organize enterprises and local institutions; constructive competitiveness and the capacity to co-operate. None of these resources can be used by exogenous or supra-local powers against the will of the people." See: John F.C., Turner (1976, repr. 2009), *Housing by*

In the case of the *urbanizaciones populares*, Turner saw a large site under construction with unlimited local resources that were gradually changing the use and form of the site's structure. All houses have been designed and built only by their users based on "what the house *does*, rather than what the house *is* or what the house *looks*" and an entrepreneurial spirit with a giant labyrinth of resources covered all public spaces.

This *Architecture Without Architects* introduced, as Bernard Rudofsky (1964; repr. 1987) wrote and illustrated in his exhibition at MOMA in 1964, "the art of building." This art of building does not carry out the predominant way in which planning has been applied, but rather places the resident at the centre of this process. Rudofsky's exhibition was a challenge for the role of the architect and the urban designer, as he outlined that the architect is mainly concerned with business and prestige rather than the problems of living. In his exhibition, Rudofsky presented photographs and only one drawing of global examples of "vernacular architecture," with the statement that architects should learn a lesson from it.¹⁸

The housing anarchist Colin Ward has also challenged the commercialized approaches to designing and planning spaces in the 1960s. Additionally, Doxiadis, in his *Anthropopolis* (1974), looked at this issue on a city-wide scale and addressed the failure of cities to serve their residents. The ideal city – the *anthropopolis* – was designed to promote human development.

Beltran's view of the *urbanizaciones populares* as slums also reflects the attitude of the state government of Maharashtra towards slums in the city of Mumbai. The official advertisement for the Dharavi Redevelopment Project of January 24, 2004, made it clear that the government intended a top-down makeover for Dharavi and compared the slum's transformation to "the process of waking up to a truly wonderful dream."¹⁹

Although the idea of the DRP was viewed by the government as a "wonderful dream," not everyone saw it as a solution to the housing problem in Mumbai. Instead, many individuals and organizations foresaw that the DRP would be a nightmare not only for its residents but also for the city. They, therefore, developed various practices to resist its implementation. In searching for ways to transform Dharavi through the involvement of its residents, the

People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments. London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2009, 48

18 Particularly, Rudofsky wrote about anonymous builders: "The beauty of this architecture has long been dismissed as accidental, but today we should be able to recognize it as the result of rare good sense in the handling of practical problems." See: Bernard Rudofsky, (1964; repr. 1987) *Architecture without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*. New York: MOMA, 1964; reprinted by University of New Mexico Press, 1987

19 See the newspaper: "Dharavi...the dreams becomes a reality," advertisement in *The Times of India*, January, 24, 2004

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URBZ team established practices of resistance to the DRP that depended on what Turner called personal and local resources.

The team of URBZ empowered and inspired communal participation in planning activities for their settlement through the use of creativity, innovation, and research. With the introduction of design workshops, art exhibitions, and the establishment of an online platform for facilitating the transfer of local knowledge, the team of URBZ created opportunities for residents to express their visions for Dharavi and to develop alternative strategies for gradually improving their settlement. Going beyond the traditional boundaries of activism and working without the government, URBZ created a link between residents and researchers around the world, thus globalizing the activism in Dharavi.

Through these different forms of resistance to the DRP, Dharavi's public space has become a huge construction site, in which building takes place on a daily basis. These buildings have arisen from the visions as well as the creative and productive spirit of its residents, but also thanks to their strategic alliances with NGOs and consequently with the government. Transformation in Dharavi is a constant process that relies not only on government projects but also, and mainly on, residents' aspirations. Furthermore, it is crucial to note the breadth of the methods used to improve living conditions in Dharavi (including research, creativity, media, and design). These stand in stark contrast to state mechanisms that depend only on capital and private investment.

The conclusions have important broader implications encapsulated in the following three sentences. First, the practice of resistance in Dharavi is strongly linked to creative and innovative strategies grounded in various experiences on its public realm with spatial transformation. Second, social movements represent powerful mechanisms for motivating residential participation in change. Third, the practices of resistance examined here have not only influenced the evolution of a government project, but have also contributed to the transformation and improvement of the territory.

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