SPATIAL UTOPIA AND CONTESTED REALITIES

Anita Patil - Deshmukh

Photo Credit: Author
Dattaram Lad Marg, Chinchpokli, Girangaon: Mill workers demonstrating for their right to work and justice. A public space as a platform for showcasing resistance, and gathering support.

Meghwadi in Mumbai right behind Finlay mill is one of the last spots in the island city where farm lands are seen. The constant vigilance and ongoing struggles of the residents of Meghwadi has kept this piece of land out of the clutches of builders and still functional as a farm. The MCGM has been supportive, helping to safeguard it by building a wall around and restricting access.
Lalbaug residents are used to walking around the drying chillies on the side walks during summer months. No shenanigan is ever created by anyone about that occupied space! Greed for good taste creates tolerance within the pedestrian or others!
This Rani Baug playground surrounded by greenery is a choice spot for the local youngsters to hone their skills of cricket. Perhaps some day a future master blaster would emerge from this spot! Compared to the open spaces in the suburbs, the island city still has the luxury of many open grounds, parks and gardens.

This courtyard of the Kaamgar Sadan Chawl in Curry road, serves as a common space to conduct daily chores of life as well as family celebrations and religious festivals. Reuse, recycle…. Since the homes in chawls are 100-150 sq feet, this community space gathers a special significance in the lives of the residents.
Most women in Dharavi, as these women from Dhigala Community, use common space outside their homes to dry papads. Papad making is their source of income from this home-based industry.

Dhobi Ghat in Dharavi - Not as famous as the one in the island city, this space provides the same facility for people of Dharavi.
Kumbharwada - the potters’ colony is a village transported from Kutch, Gujarat to Dharavi. The houses are long and have two entrances; one going to the yard where clay pots are made and the other entrance faces the street where the goods are displayed and sold. This pot baking kiln with its fire and the pot drying space stand next to each other, while a dog takes a peaceful shelter.

The hot tin roofs of Dharavi homes assume the role of natur’s free, non-polluting drying machines for the Leather hides!
Urbanization has brought about fast paced gentrification process that is clearly evident in Mumbai. This process has already deprived the island city of the 200 acres of the mill land area that could have been the city’s open spaces. Of the remaining open spaces, there is constant encroachment happening at every corner, every ground, every part process that starts as insidious but becomes permanent, thus depriving access to people. These open spaces roads, gardens, parks grounds community spaces serve many purposes….from processions to transport, from playgrounds to celebrations and festivals, from religious activities to community activities…. playgrounds to resistance movements. Here are a few of such open spaces in Girangaon and Dharavi tow of Mumbai’s fasted changing areas…
Changing face of Girangaon - These chawls are being destroyed... along with many lives....and many new “Towers” are coming up from the ashes of these chawls... like the many new lives these towers host. But where is the space for the mill workers? Where have they gone?

Botavala chawl almost in ruins. These traditional dwellings for the mill workers created and fostered a very distinctive culture which was known as the “Chawl Culture”. Many renowned artists, playwrights, singers and political leaders were nurtured in these social spaces...
Khatau mill compound,
This majestic gate must have welcomed many workers once upon a time...today it is shut for ever... shutting off many lives with it...
On one side, rows of tin windows for cooling the unbearable heat inside the mills... on the other side beautiful, Victorian style architectural details ... sign of a rich past... And of the contradictions which existed...

Haunted chawl in Lalbaug. This beautiful architecture has been preserved and not yet bulldozed down for a mall.... Thanks to it being “Haunted” It has many stories to tell but who would listen?
In the past these very chimneys reminded workers about the start of their work shifts by loud sirens... Today they are silenced by the onslaught of globalization... and stand as a iconic images of the bygone era...
This godown of the Godwani brothers near Sethwadi in Dharavi is one of the oldest standing storage godowns which is currently not functional.

This is the new form of settlement of the original inhabitants of Dharavi-Koli community (fishermen community). The Dharavi Kolis claim that they are one of the original inhabitants of the city!
Dharavi ‘District’

Dharavi is one of the informally-regularized slums amongst many more in the city of Mumbai; and yet it has unique characteristics. The history of development in Dharavi can be traced back along the lines of Girangaon – the former textile-mill area. Both areas were affected approximately during the same period, but operated in different contexts. They have responded simultaneously to industrialization and urbanization in the face of globalization: where Girangaon is heavily tied to colonialism; in contrast, Dharavi is defined by the vestiges of colonialism. Both have similar urban, social and cultural patterns developing with contrasting forms. Today, these two areas are centers of growth and re-development in Mumbai, where both are challenged and threatened to sustain their identities and the organic socio-cultural framework developed amidst the haphazard and inequitable city planning processes.