



MUMBAI, WARTS & ALL

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If we want an all-round view of Mumbai, with all its warts displayed and all its complexities examined, Mumbai Reader'10, published by the Urban Research Design Institute, is the book for us. The cover photograph that wraps the front and back of the book captures an important story about Mumbai.

Dingy tenements stand in the background, their compound walls sheltering assorted debris. The middle ground is held by a driverless autorickshaw. The foreground is a stretch of brown, pebbly earth with two dusty trees occupying the very edge.

Inside, one is greeted by a visually stimulating environment of colourful ward maps, reproductions of newspaper articles related to the subjects under discussion, and telling photographs in both black-and-white and colour interspersed with the text.

There are articles, essays and analyses here, contributed by academics, journalists, environmentalists and local historians, that cover every aspect of life in Mumbai — housing, health, livelihood, transportation, education, open space, governance, urban form.

The visuals weave through them as a parallel text, adding meaning here and making points that are tangential to the argument there. With the visuals, the process of reading, or even dipping into the book, becomes more dynamic than one would normally expect.

Obviously, this is not a book meant to be read at a stretch like fiction. My first read, very stimulating, was a hop, skip and jump through its pages, guided by visuals that caught my eye.

A photograph of the circular sweep of Elphinstone (now Horniman) Circle as it was around 1864 led me to Preeti Chopra's study of how Bombay was built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

With great wistfulness I read that the then municipal commissioners "were of the opinion that the design of the buildings around the circle should have some degree of architectural nicety, which will harmonise with the Town Hall". Later, the word harmony appears to have dropped out of the municipal lexicon altogether.

A black-and-white double spread of Bandra Fort which I had never seen from this angle before, took me to Vyjayanthi Rao's study on urban development. "The City is Not One", says a sub-head in the article, encapsulating Rao's main argument.

She points out that, unless the heterogeneity of the city is made the premise for planning, designing and building, it can never become "a space of refuge" for all its citizens. In Mumbai the citizens include, (whether the upper and middle-classes like it or not), slumdweller, migrants and people displaced by infrastructural projects.

To include them all to “create a space of refuge” is the ideal of planners and designers. But our politicians think otherwise. They simplify matters by excluding this large chunk of Mumbai’s population, leaving it to fend for itself.

The newspaper headline *Revenge of the Commuter* is the next visual that leapt out at me from the middle of Nidhi Jamwal’s article *Mumbai’s Pedestrian Paradox*. This study begins by telling us that 52 per cent of road users in Mumbai walk, and only three per cent ride in private vehicles.

So who’s the majority here? Why then is Mumbai not made walkable? Why must pedestrians be forced to dodge ‘cars’, trucks, dumpers, buses, autos and speeding bikes, putting their lives at risk every time they step out of their homes? Why can we not have footpaths, unoccupied ones, please?

If we look back on how Mumbai was built a hundred years ago, we grow wistful. If we look at Mumbai in its present form, we feel frustrated. Does the future at least hold a promise that we can look forward to? Darryl D’Monte’s article *Flawed Urban Vision* puts paid to that hope.

The famous Mumbai First plan of 2003 to transform Mumbai into a world-class city, was a dream we didn’t believe in even then, and which began dying a natural death almost as soon as it was born. The reason, says D’Monte,

is that the “managerial-technocratic view” the vision took of Mumbai did not accommodate its diversity. Back to square one.

Last year in March, D’Monte informs us, a 40-year plan for Mumbai, prepared by a team of Singapore consultants known as *Surbana*, was unveiled at the State Guest House. The plan projected a slumless Mumbai by 2052.

And? “One of the weakest links in the plan is the generation of jobs... Without a clear vision on how Mumbai... will employ the majority of its citizens, most will continue to fester in slums.” In short, the future is bleak.