



Mumbai's Biggest 'Slum'
Deserves Its Own Award:
Protection as a UN World Heritage Site
_Jeb Brugmann

Why does the world again turn attention, not to the cultural legacies of Agra, Delhi, and Thanjavur, but to Dharavi, the so-called "biggest slum in Asia?" Is there something more than cinematic exoticism that stirs transnational fascination with the gritty so-called slum? The answer, of course, is that we detect some greatness in Dharavi's against-all-odds achievements. In the face of a fast-urbanising world, people of many professions are drawing back the curtain of slum stereotypes that prevent intelligent people from seeing the genius and lessons of Mumbai's centre of bootstrap poverty reduction.

India's cities will double in population over the next 30 years. In ten years' time some 20 million new migrants, largely poor, will join the 62 million slum dwellers recognised today. The nation's prosperity, and perhaps even its stability, hinges on a strategy for urban growth that enables shack-dwelling new arrivals to reliably gain a secure, productive, and legal place in the mainstream of an urban India. Dharavi shows a way.

This is why I am making an audacious proposal: that Dharavi not only be preserved and steadily upgraded, but be designated as a United Nations World Heritage Site to protect it from expedient development schemes that will divide its communities, destroy its built genius, and deny India the greatest lessons of one of its native forms of urbanism.

The United Nations applies four main criteria, highlighted below, when selecting places like Cartagena, Havana, Liverpool, Quito, and Prague for World Heritage Site protection. Dharavi scores high on all accounts.

Dharavi "exhibits an important interchange of human values, over a span of time, on architecture, town-planning and landscape design."

To begin, Dharavi is no longer a slum. In Dharavi, hundredfold chains of migration have mixed different village traditions and trial-and-error approaches to "town planning" to build a global manufacturing and trading city in a matter of decades. To use the jargon of Western development, Dharavi now has export-oriented industry clusters. Primary industries are supported by networks of secondary suppliers and service businesses, most of which are also located in Dharavi. In spite of stable remittances to villages across India, Dharavi's economic growth, without significant external finance, suggests a very positive balance of trade.



The 'kumbarwada' residential-pottery production district of Dharavi, one of numerous Dharavi enterprise districts with distinct multi-use urban design characteristics developed by its own user community to optimise land-use for their self-organised rise from poverty.

Photo: Gabriel Britto, 2007

Capital-poor but rich in communitarian traditions, Dharavi's 80 or so village-like neighbourhoods have self-organised their artisan, trading, labor, and social traditions into production, distribution, retail, and service networks. Dharavi therefore is an "interchange of human values" fixed in space and given robust economic logic. It is the product of constant negotiation between neighbours and neighbouring communities that are spatially integrated but still reflect India's diversity.

Most urban development today is capital intensive, and therefore inaccessible to the majority. But unconstrained by large fixed capital investments and maintenance costs, Dharavi's resident-builders practice a flexible, resilient, just-in-time approach to city building that still works at the scale of more than half a million residents. Its approach offers two special advantages. First, it is accessible to migrants with limited cash-flow and credit, who incrementally build and upgrade as they generate savings over a period of years. Second, building design and arrangements can be adapted quickly and efficiently to respond to new economic, social, and environmental pressures, offering resilience for those living at the margins. Dharavi, therefore, demonstrates an adaptive, economically robust form of city building not unlike the immigrant industrial neighbourhoods of Chicago or Detroit at the foundation of their economic rise.

Dharavi is "an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, and bears a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition."

Like the traditional Mahalles of Western Asia and the Kampunges of Southeast Asia, Dharavi represents India's tradition of adapting village form, life, culture, and governance into a settlement solution for large cities. These traditional kinds of urban settlement smooth the transition from agricultural to urban society, providing governable and, when necessary, self-reliant social and political units in fast-growing cities. There are many modern, yet failed alternatives to organising large migrant populations, among them the high-rise public housing ghettos in America's inner cities and on France's urban peripheries, the Council housing estates of England, the townships of South Africa, or the communist-era residential blocks of eastern Germany.

With no economic logic of their own (*other than a constant public subsidy*), these approaches create centres of instability. In fact, the kind of American-styled 'urban renewal' to be mimicked in schemes like the so-called Slum-Free Dharavi plan was such a failure in the United States that the 1960-70s low-income housing districts are now being demolished to make way for new community-based redevelopment.



One of the builds on the left-hand side of this Dharavi street is home to the homegrown Dharavi multinational company, INMA Enterprises, specialising in the design, production, export, and global retailing of high quality fashion leather garments. The company's owners, the Khan family, migrated to Dharavi three generations earlier, where they established their pathway out of rural poverty.

Dharavi is "an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural ensemble, or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history."

Just as old Manchester evolved building types and ensembles to support the Industrial Revolution, Dharavi reveals the real-time evolution of urban designs at the cutting-edge of Asia's Urban Revolution. In Dharavi, every building, shop, and space responds to the lean economics of the migrant city builder. Dharavi residents merge otherwise separated buildings and building uses into clusters that support a variety of functions in the same space. There are residential-retail-creche buildings, retail-warehouse-movie theater buildings, or industrial-residential-warehouse buildings. The result is an extremely high utilisation rate of property. Dharavi, one might say, has invented its own form of 24/7.

Dharavi residents and businesses also have extremely low time and cash costs for transportation, relative to those located in the city around it. Most of Dharavi's workforce lives in Dharavi. The alternative is commuting from distant low-cost settlements. Similarly, many of Dharavi's industries have minimal logistics complexity or cost because manufacturers are located next door to their suppliers and retailers. Whole value chains, from material inputs like scrap metal, skins, or used food oil, to retailing of belts and soaps, are located within or adjacent to Dharavi.

With cheap land, low transportation costs, efficient utilisation of property, reduced logistics, and clustered entrepreneurial communities, the resident-worker-entrepreneurs of Dharavi gain stable competitive advantage. They can support and educate their families on low wages and long hours, and meanwhile gain access to global finance, goods, and labour markets.

Dharavi is "directly and tangibly associated with events or living traditions, ideas, or beliefs of outstanding universal significance."

But Dharavi's preservation is about more than a way to develop lasting strategic advantage from the barest slum foothold. It is also about a big strategic choice facing India and other rapidly urbanising countries. Will New India honour the ingenuity of its own urban traditions, and evolve these into even better homegrown solutions? Or will New India build its future with the less robust (*and often failed*) solutions imported from other places? The wrong choice can lead to costly nationwide folly, as witnessed in the failings of U.S. urban renewal, British Council housing estates, and the French immigrant suburbs.



The 2008 demolition of the 1950's era Cochran Gardens 'urban renewal' scheme. Cochran Gardens replaced a so-called African-American slum with single-purpose high-rise, subsidised public housing. The public housing estates quickly became centres of greater poverty, crime, addiction, and public health crisis than the erstwhile 'slums.' Such master planned developments are being demolished throughout the northeastern United States.

Photo: Preservation Research Office of St. Louis, Missouri, 2008

More recently, the United States showed how the world economy itself can be put at risk by uncritically accepted models of urban development based on deeply flawed economics. The recent subprime crisis, like the Asian financial crisis before it (1997-1998), was about far more than a failure of the banking industry. Both were crises of failed urbanism in a time of massive urban growth. Asian Tigers and the United States both turned away from tested, resilient forms of native urbanism. They turned to industrial-scale, plug-and-play building products that failed the most basic economic tests.

In the Dharavi approach, the city is designed for economic efficiency and flexible adaptability. But in the standard-issue new residential suburbs, office parks, and condominium towers of the globalising urban development industry, the city works as fixed, single purpose districts each with its own costly "plant and equipment" and hidden infrastructure costs. In the U.S., the income streams and opportunities made available in these new city districts - generally used for only part of each day - did not support the operations, service, and maintenance costs of the new urban capital stock, at either the household or city levels. The new developments drove up the total costs of urban location and living just as real incomes were going down. The rest is history.

This industrial, mass production approach to city building is being adopted in India as an expedient, "modern" way to become the "next Shanghai" or "next Silicon Valley." But Dharavi reminds us that effective urbanism provides far more than an expedient fix: it creates places that can be affordably adapted and improved upon to renew competitive advantages in the face of constant change, even for the poorest of households in the hardest of times. Dharavi offers too much guidance to a world of growing cities and their slum populations to be subject to "renewal" through demolition. It lights a path from village to slum to economic enfranchisement in the urban world. That is why it captivates the million-fold migrants of India and, along with them, the attention of the world. Just as cities like Barcelona, Lisbon, and Rio de Janeiro have preserved their erstwhile slum districts as they legalised and invested in them, Dharavi should be proudly claimed and upgraded in partnership with its existing residents. It is a unique and very salient part of living Indian heritage.

Q. Your book suggests a very different approach to urban planning.

When people think about mega cities, given that in the next 35 years, there will be half a billion urban residents in India itself, they tend to think about master planning. But experience with urban growth throughout the world has shown that real solutions counter intuitively lie at the micro level.

Q. It doesn't require a centralised approach, necessarily.

No, it allows the regulatory authorities to permit a bottom-up approach and experimentation in how people can build the city, because the city is very much an entrepreneurial phenomenon. Here different interests seek an urban location to advance their self interests. The problem of urban development is that these self interests have competing strategies for building the city. It is, in fact, at the level of design that these competing forces can find a way to collaborate.

Q. The debate is 'where does design begin and where does it end'. It is social design to architecture to finance. Coordinating various facets does call for a regulating centre.

I think it's useful to understand the city today as a chaos that needs to be reorganised into negotiation and that negotiation needs to be managed as a business process. The ability to shape a city's growth rests on the government's ability in negotiating urban spaces. Governance is the management of negotiations. What I call urban strategy is when you change the rules of the game by bringing bring design innovation into play, and negotiate between many options to optimise all interests on the table. It's not a tidy process, but cities that tried it on the verge of collapse have seen transformation.



_Interview by Malvika Tegta
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Q. How do we reconcile the various stakes on a space.

Cities get into trouble when they start building for a certain kind of people and exclude other social groups. Sometimes a design solution is not always affordable. But cities like Curitiba prove that if you take a blank sheet approach to problems and don't assume, in a dogmatic way, what the constraints are, there's much more room for innovation in the cities than we ever imagined.

Q. But some legitimate constraints do exist – space and money.

One of my specialities is designing products for very poor people. We find in business, again and again, that innovation has led to drastic reduction in costs. Robust design really is about re-testing the constraints and understanding it, so new possibilities are created.

Q. How do we reconcile the idea of a Dharavi with the idea of an Urban district.

A country that's going to see millions of poor migrate into the city from rural areas -- who only know how to build a village -- needs to provide a staged pathway for people to build a village in the city, then to invest in it to make it a hub of economic activity where they can establish a livelihood. Then it can build it up to a city district that exists according to the standards of urban infrastructure and quality of life. The argument is -- India will have slums; the question is can you make slums as something that's done with expertise?

City is a bottom-up process

Intro: In his latest book, *Welcome to the Urban Revolution*, Jeb Brugmann argues that the world is 'not' flat and reveals that it is the 'city' that is the medium for a revolutionary change.