

# Diversity, Complexity, Conviviality: Propositions for Urban Development

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## **Planning and Theory:**

In a recent article titled “Learning from Paradoxes about Prediction and Planning in Self-Organizing Cities,” Juval Portugali writes about a fundamental discrepancy that “characterizes urban and regional planning: on the one hand, planning theory, as well as the structure of planning law, practice and administration, are all based on the (usually implicit) assumption that cities are essentially predictable entities; that given sufficient data and information, their future behavior is in essence predictable. On the other hand, current urban theory suggests that cities are complex, self-organizing and non-linear systems and that as a consequence their future behavior is in essence not predictable; even if sufficient information and data is collected and available.”<sup>1</sup>

This discrepancy certainly seems to apply to Mumbai as various solutions designed to ‘solve’ its innumerable problems continuously generate new conditions not necessarily predicted by the assumptions made in the development plan. Such conditions, in turn, have produced their own genre of innovative fixes and the actually

existing urbanism of Mumbai and other Indian cities is constituted by a loop between conditions generated by various planning instruments, their deployment and the further innovations required to accommodate the conditions to which they were originally proposed as solutions.

The “problem” of the slum appears to constitute one such loop. As experts such as Shirish Patel and others have pointed out, slum settlements were ‘solutions’ to rental housing shortages generated by the Rent Control Act of 1947. However, the more recent explosion of slum settlements can no longer be attributed merely to this particular, anti-speculative planning instrument. Instead, in the wake of two decades of various slum rehabilitation schemes and other innovations designed to improve housing quality for residents deemed politically and administratively legitimate by the State the most recent census figures indicate an increase rather than a decrease in types of settlements deemed to be slums. This apparent paradox can be explained to some extent by the increased openness of certain residents to speculative possibilities that are presented to them through various urban development and infrastructure development schemes which leads to a further production of slum settlements this time not merely as a solution to housing shortages but also as speculative instruments through which to leverage a different position in the real estate market.

The city is now layered with situations that juxtapose the planned with the unplanned and the unplanned in the planned. This ‘unplanned’ aspect - to which the term ‘informal’ is

liberally applied by planning theorists, politicians and urban entrepreneurs – is so widespread that indeed it appears to be immanent or inherent to the manner in which cities are organized. Yet it is precisely that which cannot be fixed – in the sense of being put into place by fiat and thus fixed in terms of its value on the one hand and in the sense of being open to resolution on the other. Thus the informal has the character of being at once within and beyond the realm of knowledge, experience and expectation.

What role can design play in this situation? In other words, what role can we expect for expert knowledge and intervention into the future whose very anticipation is the business of everyday life for numerous actors in this city? These actors range from planners and policy makers; ordinary residents who live in slum communities and ‘middle-class’ dwellings; new migrants to the city and those thousands of families who have been recently relocated to the hundreds of new buildings produced in the last two decades for ‘rehabilitating’ people displaced by the demolition of their homes by fiat, flood and new infrastructure projects; and the perpetrators of new forms of urban violence who have used the city as a target for making new kinds of political claims, often beyond the claims of national citizenship and belonging. Each of these groups participates in the project of “city-making” through their own logics of future-anticipation. The city, however, is a network constituted by these different and often contradictory projects of city-making. Again therefore, we need to raise the question of the place of self-conscious acts of design and the place of such acts in debates about

<sup>1</sup> Juval Portugali, “Learning from Paradoxes about Prediction and Planning in Self-Organizing Cities,” in *Planning Theory*, Volume 7(3):248-262.

the direction of urban development and urban growth. This depends, to some extent, on what philosophy of design animates our urban visions. But prior to discussing the question of a philosophy of design, we need to turn our attention to an analytic picture of the city as heterogeneous network of diversities.

### **The City is Not One:**

In general today we might speak today of two shifts - first, the demographic shift from rural to urban majorities and second, the shift from the planned city, whose horizon is order and certainty to a more speculative city, whose organizing principle is volatility and uncertainty. This volatility and uncertainty extends across sectors - from the financial to the environmental to the level of community. Urban communities have always been distinct insofar as their very organization depended upon openness to diversity if not always its tolerance and the cultivation of the city as a space of refuge for such diversity. How do cities "work" amidst such heterogeneity? Scholars and practitioners have framed answers to this question in different ways through empirical observation of processes in different cities:

1. Through the political mobilization of the will of "majorities."
2. Through the substantiation of abstract notions such as the right of all to the city.
3. Through the sustained, everyday mobilization of socio-political networks to maintain peace amongst diverse groups.

Each of these positions recognizes urban diversity in different

ways - the first position specifies and requires the structural presence of one or more minorities; the second assumes the ultimate transcendence of such structural divisions whilst maintaining diverse identities; and the third recognizes the potential for conflict as itself the condition of possibility for maintaining diversity. Each position is rooted in the understanding that a fragile cosmopolitanism, however it is maintained, is necessary for the functioning of a city at any scale.

Yet, in the context of today's cities, with volatility and uncertainty as their organizing principles, it is necessary to focus on how diversity is itself conceived and constructed rather than take the forms of community that lend substantive basis for urban diversity for granted. Here, we might conceive three major axes along which diversity is produced in everyday urban life:

1. Conviviality - if we assume the city to be de facto a space of heterogeneity, what are the processes by which this heterogeneity is maintained whilst scaling up the interests of different groups - communities of ascription, achievement and aspiration - into the interests of the city as such? Second, how can we conceive of conviviality itself in different ways, ones that accommodate contemporary conditions of flux and uncertainty - for instance, the entitlement to citizenship and its consequent assumption of urban harmony has played a dominant ideological role in organizing urban activism amongst governments, NGOs and communities. However,

what would change if conviviality were thought through different metaphors and paradigms, such as flux and entropy as organizing principles of everyday life? In other words, paradigms that fundamentally shift the understanding of conflict as threat to something else? If this is the case, what happens to notions of minorities as the sources of "difference"? Can majorities themselves be reconceived as dense proximities of differences rather than as "fuzzy" but homogeneous images of sameness? What would such a shift in the imaginary of majority and minority do for the practical question of transforming diversity into an inclusive and creative force? What is the role of urban imaginaries - or ideas of urban "soul" - which can lend identity in a non-consumer sense and new branding possibilities for urban marketing in producing new notions of conviviality?

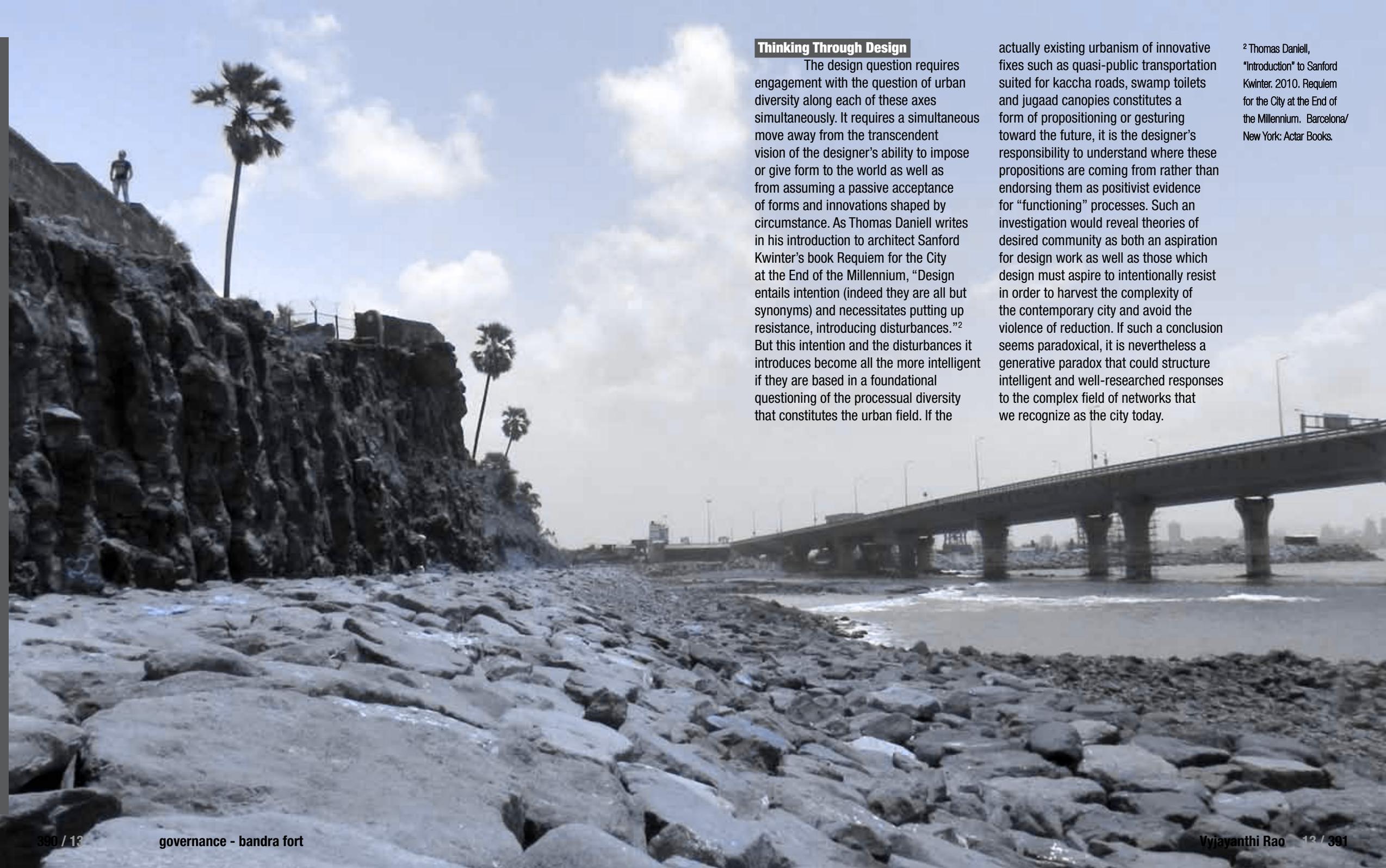
2. Infrastructure - cities today are complex "systems of systems." They are given form through the sheer diversity of actants - humans, non-humans, and networked technologies. The infrastructural layers of cities establish core capacities and relations between the body, technology and subjectivity. However, these relations are continuously changing and are rearticulated as infrastructural capacities change.

Numerous cities where planning has been playing 'catch-up' and which operate through an aesthetic of "make-do," are working through "user-innovations" that are responses to particular conditions. The diversity of these innovations adds up to a fragmented urban landscape

that in turn compel further innovation both on the part of users/residents and on the part of 'experts.' These in turn produce new subjective configurations amongst resident-users. How can we track this kind of diversity and be mindful of its relationship to what appears to be a more straightforward understanding of diversity as a patchwork of cultural identities or in other words, of diversity in terms of community?

3. Habitat and Form - cities today have a paradoxical relationship to the diversity of forms and habitats. On the one hand, such diversity and the associated forms of life are valued as the lens through which urban history becomes visible and capable of being mapped in relation to particular communities as signs of their identity (urban villages, historic districts etc.) or as signs of and testaments to their labor and industry (such as slums and working class districts).

On the other hand, contemporary cities are also constantly battling against the financialization of built forms as conduits for the circulation of capital and, in densely populated cities, also against the imposition of vertical forms as the most efficient form of articulating population accommodation with financial flows. This has the effect of homogenizing urban built forms. What kind of balance can cities today strike between maintaining diversity of built forms, mindfulness to the effects they have on creating differences amongst communities as well as remaining alert to both the healthy and harmful effects of homogeneity at the level of built form.



### Thinking Through Design

The design question requires engagement with the question of urban diversity along each of these axes simultaneously. It requires a simultaneous move away from the transcendent vision of the designer's ability to impose or give form to the world as well as from assuming a passive acceptance of forms and innovations shaped by circumstance. As Thomas Daniell writes in his introduction to architect Sanford Kwinter's book *Requiem for the City at the End of the Millennium*, "Design entails intention (indeed they are all but synonyms) and necessitates putting up resistance, introducing disturbances."<sup>2</sup> But this intention and the disturbances it introduces become all the more intelligent if they are based in a foundational questioning of the processual diversity that constitutes the urban field. If the

actually existing urbanism of innovative fixes such as quasi-public transportation suited for kaccha roads, swamp toilets and jugaad canopies constitutes a form of propositioning or gesturing toward the future, it is the designer's responsibility to understand where these propositions are coming from rather than endorsing them as positivist evidence for "functioning" processes. Such an investigation would reveal theories of desired community as both an aspiration for design work as well as those which design must aspire to intentionally resist in order to harvest the complexity of the contemporary city and avoid the violence of reduction. If such a conclusion seems paradoxical, it is nevertheless a generative paradox that could structure intelligent and well-researched responses to the complex field of networks that we recognize as the city today.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Daniell, "Introduction" to Sanford Kwinter. 2010. *Requiem for the City at the End of the Millennium*. Barcelona/ New York: Actar Books.