

RE-VISIONING MUMBAI

A Gendered View

1.

Planners might conceive of Bombay / Mumbai as a concrete entity with boundaries defined in municipal administrative terms. But the city is more than this and sometimes less than this: a collective of the composite imaginations of various groups of people who inhabit it. Yet the planning of the city reflects very little of this diversity. At a time when Mumbai is contemplating its image in the international socio-political landscape – in the attempt to present itself as a truly global city for the 21st century, the question is whose city is it?

Almost everyone who is someone has had their say on “Vision Mumbai”¹. Some point Mumbai in the direction of Singapore, others look to Shanghai for inspiration. This global-aspirational vision excludes an increasing number of people seen as obstacles to the realisation of this narrow vision.

Many city planners and decision-makers assume that the Mumbai ‘citizen’ is an undifferentiated and neutral individual with homogenous needs. This approach systematically erases the presence of the more vulnerable among the city’s population – children, the disabled, the aged, slum dwellers, hawkers and the homeless – those with a less tangible claim to the city’s resources. And across all of these groups, women are more disenfranchised than men.

At the same time, public spaces, truly public spaces, those open and accessible and most importantly free (that is not paid) are rapidly shrinking. The shrinking of these spaces is paralleled by an increasing intolerance for the presence of those not seen to belong – the poor cast as migrants, the Muslims cast increasingly as outsiders and potential terrorists, the lower class men cast as molesters, and all women cast as potential victims.

2.

Studies conducted in cities across the world demonstrate that the special needs of women as citizens are not accounted for in the design and planning of the metropolis.

For the last three years, the PUKAR² Gender and Space project, funded by the Indo-Dutch Programme on Alternative Development, has been examining the ways in which Mumbai’s public spaces reflect and reinforce gender inequities. The numbers of women in public space reflect this inequitous reality. As per our mapping counts in the localities of Chembur, Pydhonie and Nariman point, the maximum women at any given time were 28 per cent around noon in Chembur, and the minimum were 2.5 per cent at 9.30 p.m. in Pydhonie.

By focusing on women’s everyday interactions and negotiations in public spaces – such as streets, markets, railway stations, bus-stops, parks, shopping malls, and coffee shops – and not just on the major attacks that get reported in the media, the intention is to understand women’s relationships with the city as processes rather than as events.



Source: UDRI

¹ ‘Vision Mumbai’ was an idea first mooted in a report prepared by international consulting firm McKinsey for Bombay First, a corporate funded lobby group, and further augmented by Vilasrao Deshmukh’s state government as the new image makeover for Mumbai in 2004-2005.

² Partners for Urban Knowledge, Action and Research (PUKAR) is a non-profit interdisciplinary research collective based in Mumbai. An innovative and experimental initiative, it aims to contribute to a global debate about urbanization and globalization. For more information, see www.pukar.org.in

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Through focus group discussions in various parts of the city from Pali Hill to Kalachowki, Lokhandwala to Dharavi, Malabar Hill to Dongri; ethnographies at multiple locations; interviews with women across class and community; we asked women to envision spaces that they are comfortable in, to tell us about localities that offer them better access, and to suggest changes in infrastructure and services that can enhance their sense of safety and wellbeing.

Not surprisingly, what they told us finds very little mention in the popular debate on the new vision of Mumbai. In fact, in many ways, women’s visions contradict the proposed utopias of planners. An example of this is the attempt to look at slum and hawker clearance as the panacea for all the ills of the global mega-city. But in fact for women, hawkers often represent friendly and familiar ‘eyes’ on the street. “Our watchman changes more often than the *bhelpuriwallah* at the corner,” said one participant at a focus group discussion at Pali Hill. A group of corporate women in Nariman Point agreed that the food stalls that dot the area add to the familiarity of the place making it less potentially threatening, particularly after dark. **Women living in Kala Chowki in central Mumbai who use Cotton Green railway station pointed out that the station felt less safe since the three food stalls that operated on the platforms had shut down. Similarly women commuters who navigated the area between the office district of Fort and the Churchgate railway station lamented that ever since the hawkers vending books on the pavement were cleared off in 2005, that particular area in the late evening seemed so dark and threatening that they actually walked through it at a faster pace.**

In mixed use areas, shops, business establishments open late into the night provide a sense of safety by ensuring that the area is active at all times of the day- late into the night. This enhances women’s access to public space.

Zoning of the city into residential, commercial and industrial areas spaces re-inscribes prevalent gender dualisms that separate public and private and relegate women to the home. Multi-zoning on the other hand, allows more women to engage actively with public space in multiple ways (as employees, consumers and so on) more easily since home (and children), continue to remain the primary responsibility for many women.

In addition to policy and social matters an aspect of the city which is often overlooked – perhaps because it is so obvious – is the material design of environments. Amongst other things, issues such as clear sight lines, easy entry and exit points and adequate lighting add substantially to women’s sense of safety in a space. Unfortunately many of these requirements are at odds with what are prevalent urban design aesthetic paradigms. A case in point is the design of parks. It is clearly seen that parks with high fences and few exits along with dense green on the periphery that cuts sight lines, discourage women from using them unless in male company.

Our work with under-graduate students in city colleges suggests that a focus on the politics of urban aesthetics sometimes literally misses the woods for the trees. A light bulb moment in our teaching architecture³ students comes when the students realize

³ Apart from research, the Gender and Space project has focused on pedagogy as well teaching both short and long courses on the theme of gender and public space in various college settings in Mumbai.

that the pavement they would design would not necessarily be the pavement they would be safe walking on.

In the given exercise, students are asked to trace the path they would choose to take while negotiating a fictitious street. The street is edged on one side by a park; the adjacent footpath neatly fenced on both sides and lined with trees. This is the kind of edge that urban designers dream of. On the other side is lower-middle class housing – where activities spill out on the street. Yet, ironically, an overwhelming majority of the female students say that they would choose to walk on the residential edge, however messy it may be, because it is safer. Those who choose to walk on the park edge do so along the road rather than within the fenced-in footpath. A tree-lined fenced street with low visibility would make escape difficult in an assault situation – leading most women to prefer the other side of the road.

Clean lines and people-less streets do not equal comfort or safety. In fact, contrary to common sense notions of urban beautification, women often prefer a degree of chaos, ambiguity and multiplicity to univalent notions of cleanliness and order. Crowds, so long as they are not predominantly male, are also perceived as being more comfortable than lonely, albeit beautiful, streets. Aesthetic appeal, however, has become the primary concern of new planning with urban design fixated on the idea of creating a 'world-class-cities' largely premised on the visual image of clean sanitized public spaces. The debate on urban planning, we would like to argue, is broader and more complex than has hitherto been suggested. While there are specific things that most women want – more and better designed toilets, enhanced lighting, public recreation spaces that are easily visible to and accessible from the street – infrastructural provisions are inadequate in the absence of a change in approach. Until then, the language of neutral citizenship will continue to cater only to the needs of those who are upper- class, upper-caste, able-bodied and male.

4.

In our conversations we realised that women actively strategise in order to maximise their access to public space while ensuring that they project themselves as 'good' women. Safety for women does not automatically come from institutional factors like infrastructure or policing but has to be actively produced by women on an everyday basis. Women across the city have recorded the ways in which they feel compelled to produce safety for themselves through various strategies like carrying pepper sprays, clinging to their cell phones, travelling in groups or seeking male escorts. Women also actively manufacture a sense of both purpose and respectability by carrying large bags, reflecting on attire and never meeting the gaze of strangers.

While women feel physically safer in their own neighbourhoods, where they are known and recognised this does not translate into increased access to public space. In fact, spaces in which women are known often restrict access. Furthermore, ghettos of all kinds: housing societies, buildings, chawls and slum settlements that are composed of single or similar communities are far more restrictive of the movements of women than more heterogeneous communities. Within these same neighbourhoods, women who were seen as transgressive: usually single or divorced women, or those who openly flouted social norms were subject to hostility and harassment – much more in their own neighbourhoods than outside – where they were comparatively anonymous. The need to produce safety in public space often erases the seriousness of the threat of violence faced inside homes, the most dangerous places for women to be.⁴

⁴ Data on domestic violence and assaults demonstrates that the greater proportion of violence against women takes place in the private spaces of their homes.



Source: UDRI

5.

In 2006, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the approximately 700 acres of land that have opened up in Central Mumbai following the closure of the textile mills can all be sold for profit over-ruling the Mumbai High Court's decision to retain one third of the space as public space and one third for low cost housing.

For instance, the recent imposition of dress codes by several colleges in the city and the Mumbai University's contemplation of a uniform dress code suggests a growing concern with what women are wearing.

5.

In real terms public spaces in Mumbai are diminishing at a very fast pace. The government has shown little interest in preserving what little remains as public and worse still the courts too seem ambivalent on the issue⁵. What seems to be replacing public spaces are the new spaces of consumption – the malls, coffee shops and night-clubs – which masquerade as public-private spaces that are open to all but are actually engaged in the construction of a global modernity, one based on a selective and particular visibility of women.

The demand for the safety of a certain kind of woman in public space – namely respectable middle class – is one that receives wide support. The media, corporate houses, the police and other governmental institutions and functionaries are quick to add their voice to the demand for such safety. The visible presence of a certain kind of woman – professional and consumer – is integral to the idea of the global world city indicating not just safety but also modernity.

As more women access education and paid employment and become more visible in the public sphere, they also concomitantly become more visible in public space. This necessitates the putting up of restrictive boundaries⁶. But while women want to be comfortable when they access spaces outside their home, they do not want to be policed. They want safety but not surveillance. Protection from everyday violence and harassment is desired but this has to be available not just to certain women – those perceived as respectable and middle class – but to all women across class, caste and community: sex workers, bar dancers, spaghetti strap clad, sari clad and burkha clad. In fact not just women but all marginalised people, for it is only if the city is welcoming to all people that it is safe and welcoming for all women. We at the Gender & Space project hope to take the discussion on envisioning the city for the future beyond safety to assert that all people have the right to access public space as citizens. As we rethink the city, it is important to challenge the ideological assumptions about a woman's proper place that normalize women's anxieties in relation to public space and at the same time to make a strong claim for women's right to experience the varied pleasures of the city as flaneurs who may choose to take risks and as individuals who have not just a conditional right to protection but to a fuller and more meaningful citizenship.

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