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INTERVENTIONS INTO
THE DEVELOPMENT PLANS : Some Conceptual Notes

RENOVATING THE CITY:
Reading the landscape of the Mega-Project

It is no exaggeration to state that Mumbai today is a vast construction site. From the southern most wards of the city to the urban frontiers of the northern suburbs, new buildings are being constructed and existing ones are undergoing redevelopment. Mega-infrastructure initiatives are visible and felt everywhere as new road works and metro and mono-rail projects that are underway have resulted in dug-up roads, stalled traffic and a general experience of distended and wasted time spent navigating this new space of construction. These projects of construction and reconstruction are of course connected to vast and systematic displacements of people from various forms of settlements, from occupancies along the railway lines and roads being widened to the chawls of the mill districts of central Mumbai and the even older tenements of south

Mumbai, some of which are officially classified heritage buildings.

Alongside these displacements, there is also a vast new infrastructure and geography of resettlement, which contributes significantly to the visual experience of city today. This infrastructure is both hard and soft, including buildings constructed by the MMRDA for resettling the "PAP"s or persons affected by the various mega-infrastructure initiatives like MUTP and MUIP. It also includes buildings that have been made possible by the Transferable Development Rights released to private builders collaborating with MMRDA as well as with the Slum Redevelopment Authority (SRA) and with MHADA in their various social housing initiatives. These rights, which are the "soft" infrastructure enabling the emergence of a new built environment, are financial instruments in their own right as they facilitate the conversion of all forms of occupation into the real estate form of private property. The forest of concrete towers, or high-rise buildings (buildings taller than 18 storeys) that are under development in various parts of Mumbai, both North and South, are the correlative forms enabled by a market for TDRs as well as other concessions granted to private developers, especially increases in FSI granted systematically across the city.

As is well known, these policy decisions have already altered the existing development plan significantly by the ad hoc and piecemeal nature of the interventions as well as because of the multiplicity of agencies involved in their implementation. This multiplicity has resulted in the proliferation of different kinds of practices to deal with issues that are strikingly similar in all cases of displacement,

resettlement and reconstruction. These issues include the extension of municipal and social services, dissemination of information and the re-embedding of social and informational networks. Yet, even if these issues were to be adequately addressed, the systematic transformation of the development plan in the pursuit of the status of a "world-class" city raises fundamental questions about the role of planning and its relationship to practices of design and to the production of lived place. This brief essay will review some of the recent literature that brings these questions about urban planning to the fore and links them to questions about the roles that research and design can play in contemporary Mumbai.

"OCCUPANCY URBANISM": A VIEW FROM ELSEWHERE

"The periphery is included in that it falls under the jurisdiction of the local or the national state – subject to its laws and policies, while also assigned a valuation where it counts for little in terms of its overall contribution to the substance of the polity itself. This double status renders the periphery as a space in need of the largesse and guidance of a center – since, by this logic, the periphery is a space imbued with a sense of insufficiency and incompletion."

~ A. M. Simone

As Solomon Benjamin, Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone – all scholars of matters urban – have stressed in recent work, the problem with much urban theory lies in its framing from the point of view of planning. By enshrining the plan as normative, they argue, urbanists miss the range of everyday practices of place-making that substantiate the presence of excluded and peripheral groups in the city. In so doing, even progressive scholarship and activism colludes with those processes that seek to dispossess and

marginalize large groups of people. Solomon Benjamin, for instance, has advanced the concept of "occupancy urbanism" to show how the everyday politics around the occupation of land in urban areas drives both urban economies and politics in various Indian cities. These practices of occupancy urbanism form a distinct counter-point to the economy of the "Mega" project, which implicates global finance capital, national policy making and civil society groups in the dispossession and impoverishment of various settled and emergent communities within the city. Mumbai's mega-projects perhaps provide an exaggerated illustration of this process.

An imaginary map of the "Mega" in Mumbai could begin from the vacant and occupied lands of the Eastern Waterfornt, travel north toward M Ward and from there to over the Thane creek bridge to New Bombay/Navi Mumbai, ending up at the proposed new airport as an exit point or, reversing that route, enter the heart of the old city through the Navi Mumbai airport. As one traverses through this terrain that is emergent, one realizes that the brownfields of Mahul and Anik, skirting the Wadala salt pans are simultaneously dying and coming to life. While there is talk of shutting down the RCF factory, Pepsico's manufacturing plant has started production within its ambit, bottling and distributing hundreds of liters of drinking water as commodity while a stone's throw from the factory, tens of buildings, meant to resettle "PAP"s lie empty and abandoned, like still-born life, DOA. These buildings are generating, in Solomon Benjamin's terms, "real-estate surpluses" that have already been redistributed across the city, plugged into more profitable circuits of the land market. Yet their presence continues to be speculative, establishing a claim upon the mega-geography to come in the wake of the new airport and the trans-harbour link bridge. Thus the plan creates, as Benjamin puts it, a "ghost" that is taken up by progressive activism as the specter against which a battle must be

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waged to ensure that; citizenship claims are made through "structured civil representation." By contrast, Benjamin's extended ethnographic research reveals a world of what he calls "occupancy urbanism," that has effectively created "an arena subverting the mega." And it is this occupancy urbanism in turn that is the ghost that conjures calls for "structured civil representation."

This arena, Edgar Pieterse shows, is broadly labeled the arena of "informalization" and conceptualizations of the informal have resulted in a spectrum of positions about its effects on global society that in turn have contributed to a widespread perception among global elites about an impending urban crisis. These conceptualizations assume planning to be a normative action that will address the crisis. This faith in planning in turn is closely connected with the fact that research about actually existing urbanism, or occupancy urbanism reveals that vast territories in Indian cities are in fact developed outside the ambit of master plans. Thus the desire to bring order to cities in the interest of global capital or in the interest of good governance results in proposals for creative ways of dealing with these developed and regularized territories.

Mumbai's Mega-projects and their associated R&R projects serve as an exemplar of what Benjamin calls a "politics of policing" in which state and parastatal bodies, deploying a rhetoric of planning, divide and nominate areas of the city into "planned" and "slums" which must be brought into the ambit of planned space. Of course this binary opposition uses the label "slum" as a shorthand to point to a variety of styles and patterns of settlement, all sharing the common feature of being slated for redevelopment. The circuit of crisis, planning and policy is completed by the role played by NGOs in these resettlements, and, as Benjamin puts it, "the narrative posed by well meaning progressive academics and activists around it: 'inclusive and participatory planning' to

address 'fractured cities'." (2008, 724)

In the rest of this paper, I would like to ask, what then are the narratives that can be developed around occupancy urbanism, with its multi-pronged relationships to regulation? What are the horizons and futures that such a position might make possible? What kinds of effects might such new narratives have upon the contemporary urban landscape? And, finally, what kinds of design actions might be shaped by these new forms of research and rhetoric? One key point to be stressed here is that all this will also require a new conceptualization of normativity. Following the French philosopher of science, Georges Canguilhem, we note that normativity cannot be assumed a priori as does modernist planning. Instead, Canguilhem stressed the continual generation of new forms and states of normativity through the constant debate between life and its environment or milieu. Since design actions depend fundamentally upon insights into the generation of such forms and states of normativity, such reconceptualizations will necessarily have an impact upon conceptions of planning.

VISUALIZING THE FUTURE: IN LIEU OF THE MASTER PLAN

Within the social sciences, the peculiarity of the urban as research context lies in the constant blurring of the lines between research and design or between the production of knowledge and its translation into acts of renovation and repair. Research itself, in other words, becomes a part of the circuit of breakdown, repair and renovation that characterizes the city. In so doing, it simultaneously becomes an act of design in and of itself. Both within academic and policy frameworks, the urban context of the Global South has been largely thought through particular, normative hypotheses about what cities might and should

generate – the good life, conviviality, friendship, citizenship and political belonging – in short, developmentalism. Increasingly progressive academia and activism accept the inevitability of the marriage of these goals with global economic integration, as Benjamin points out. In so doing, these kinds of hypotheses have locked knowledge about cities into particular parameters that celebrate permanence over provisionality and, as such, very particular visions of risk taking and innovation. On the one hand they accept the forms of risk that have been critical to the circulation of global capital and on the other, they celebrate forms of risk-taking and innovation in settlement that have enabled marginalized and excluded groups to substantiate their presence in the city.

This triad of development, urban design and planning and productive citizenship within the ambit of global capital seems to lock urban collectivities into particular visions of urban futures, ones that are resolutely modernist. This understanding of research and design hones in on aspirational collectivities, excluding those practices and groups that seem to be already caught up in the pursuit of goals which are also consonant with desires to be modern, albeit differently modern such as those groups practicing "occupancy urbanism." But there is another understanding of knowledge production, one that reverses the relationship between research and design, breaking down the circuit between research and design by positing design itself as a research method, as a method for probing the provisional and for discerning emerging states and forms of normativity from careful ethnographic study of the contestation between life and its milieu that characterizes the urban world today.

In this regard, forms of representative thinking – such as those exemplified by surveys and statistical methods – must be supplemented by representational thinking

for which techniques for visualizing data become critical practices. Such visualization exercises, like ethnography, are necessarily partial, open-ended and speculative. The example of the emerging Eastern "Mega" landscape given above is one such exercise in visualization that combines emergent with speculative thinking, rooted in the real. As much as urban contexts affect how we might design and plan and therefore how we think about intervening into the development plan, we should also frame the ways in which design as a process affects how we understand the urban as context. Here I am explicitly thinking of "occupancy urbanism" as a form of design practice, albeit practiced by non-professionals, which implicates land and its occupation within circuits of economic activity and politics.

Thus, research about the impact of R&R and its infrastructural demands upon the next development plan will have to take into account the ways in which these sites are being speculatively occupied, both by "PAP"s and others who have entered into these terrains as renters or beneficiaries through other means. Such research will be critical rather than utopian with regard to the goals of resettlement and will treat resettlement itself as provisional, open-ended and fluid rather than as a permanent solution to an existing crisis. For the environments that are being developed are certainly designed for obsolescence and recycling into more profitable circuits of capital. And the ways in which they are being occupied surely do not conform to the utopian expectations of resettlement project thinking. I suggest that replacing such "project thinking" with "critical thinking" might yield interesting insights for dealing with actually existing urbanism, one that follows the principles outlined by Benjamin for his material-conceptual notion of "occupancy urbanism."

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